THE

Usefulness, Truth, and Excellency

OF THE

Christian Revelation

DEFENDED

Against the Objections contain'd in a late Book,

INTITLED,

Christianity as old as the Creation, &c.

By JAMES FOSTER.

The SECOND EDITION, with the Addition of a Postscript.

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THE

PREFACE.

HAT infidelity has increas'd among us very much of late, is a general observation. And as we believe Christianity to be a rational, and excellent institution, it must seem the more strange to us, that this should happen in an age that boafts of free inquiry, and would be thought neither to receive, nor reject any religious opinions, but upon folid grounds. I shall not pretend to assign any causes of it that are universal, and much less to determine positively that it always proceeds from vitious motives, and the influence of irregular passions; because there are innumerable prejudices that insensibly byass, and mislead the mind, where there is both a good understanding, and an honest heart; and general charges (which is the utmost length we can go; for of the principles and views by which particular persons are influenc'd, nothing can be known certainly, till the secrets of all bearts are reveal'd) general charges, I say, of infincerity, perverseness, and wilful error, are as easily brought by bigots and enthusiasts against

gainst the opposers of false religions, as by the defenders of the true against their antagonists. There is one thing however that appears to be a very strong and common prejudice against the Christian religion, which I cannot omit, since it depends intirely on Christians themselves, and consequently, as they might have prevented, it is not yet out of their power to remove it; I mean those corruptions in doctrine, and gross superstitions in worship, by which they have defac'd the simplicity, and beauty of true Christianity, and which have been urg'd indeed with greater zeal than morality itself. These the adversaries of our religion, without examining farther, blend with its original, and essential doctrines; and thus it is condemn'd for no other reason, but because it has been misrepresented. A melancholy reflection this! that Christians should furnish infidels with the choicest weapons to attack their own cause; but at the same time, on the fide of unbelievers, a fure argument of a shallow and superficial judgment in these points, and which destroys all their pretences to fair reasoning. For such a method of proceeding is not doing common justice to the writings of the New Testament; nay farther, if the principles of any religion are to be taken thus at second hand, and rejected without being inquir'd into, there is no rule left whereby to distinguish between true, and false religions; and 'tis impossible that any revelation, which God may communicate to mankind, should ever make its way in the world, even

even the it be in itself most perfect, and brings with it the highest, and noblest credentials.

THE author of Christianity, &c. like most other opposers of revelation, puts on an affected concern for the purity of the Christian religion. and would be thought to do it honour by shewing it to be only a republication of the law of nature, the original and universal religion of mankind. And indeed these writers are not to be blam'd for acting thus in disguise, till they can declare openly against it without danger. But it were to be wish'd, methinks, that all unnecessary terrors being remov'd, they might no longer be forc'd to the inconfistent pretence of exalting Christianity by destroying it, and honouring it by representing all its peculiar doctrines as absurd, and senseless. In the mean time, as matters now stand; if we would come at their true sentiments, we must interpret all their books by this key. Then we shall be in no danger of being deceiv'd, either by specious titles, or feeming concessions. For the title, which our author, in particular, has given to his performance, fince 'tis most evidently bis intention to subvert the Christian religion, can't but be universally understood to mean this, and this only, Christianity as old as the creation, or good for nothing; or, which amounts to the same, Christianity, the moral doctrines of it excepted, superstition and enthusiasm.

IN my remarks upon this discourse, I have not consider'd it chapter by chapter (a great part of it being nothing at all to my purpose; and for the rest, the same sentiments being of-ten repeated, and falling in here and there without much method or connection ;) but have endeavour'd to digest the substance of it, so far as the cause of Christianity is concern'd, under proper beads, both for the greater entertainment, and advantage of the reader. Nor have I carried the opposition so far, as to dispute all the principles in it on which a great stress is laid; because some of them appear to me, if rightly explain'd (a point indeed in which our author is very defective) to be rational, and just; and only the consequences he draws from them to be fallacious, and fophistical,

THUS, for instance, I make no seruple to allow, that reason, if it be rightly improved, is sufficient to discover all the principles and duties of natural religion; or, that tis sufficient, at all times, to teach men all that God requires of them in their various circumstances; and have shewn, that notwithstanding this, when reason is actually corrupted, and darken'd, a revelation is never the less desireable, or useful. But if we go farther, and urge the actual corruption of the world, as a proof of the insufficiency of reason, in itself, to teach men natural religion and morality, or those duties, which they are indispensably oblig'd

to know and practife in order to their acceptance with God; and consequently make a revelation not only of advantage in certain circumstances, but absolutely, and at all times, necessary; besides that we shall, I fear, hardly be able to account for its not being universal, fince all our reasonings are form'd upon the general necessities of mankind; besides this, I Say, we can never answer the very same argument retorted upon us from the ignorance, and Superstition of Christians, against the sufficiency even of revelation. In truth the argument is bad either way; for indolence, prejudice, and vitious affections will pervert, and darken the plainest rule. And as the corruptions of the Heathen world, if they had been much greater than they really were, would, no more than they do now, have inferr'd the insufficiency of reason as a guide in itself; it must follow by the same rule, that the degeneracy among Christians, tho it could be shewn to be more gross than any Pagans were ever chargeable with, is no rational prejudice either against the perfection, or perspicuity of the Christian revelation. For 'tis most evident, that in both cases the event is not owing to a defect in the original rule, but to mens not attending to it, or substituting other false rules in the place of it; and the prevalency of ignorance, Superstition, and vice, more in some ages than in others, may arise from a great variety of circumstances, which, when they happen to concur, may make the plainest and most complete rule of less use, A 4 than,

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than, in different circumstances, another that is vastly more obscure, and impersect.

THE alterations in this second edition are so few, and of so little consequence with respect to the main argument, that, I am persuaded, they will not be thought to be any real prejudice to the first, nor consequently to need an apology. And care has been taken, that a sufficient number of the most considerable additions, which are a postscript, and a short table of contents, should be printed separately, for the sake of those who have the former edition. I have nothing to add, but that, as I shall be ready, upon conviction, to correct any errors in the reasoning part; so, if the author of Christianity, &c, can shew; that I have misrepresented his sense, or treated him, in any respect, uncivilly, I promise to ask his pardon, and give him, publickly, all the satisfaction he can desire,

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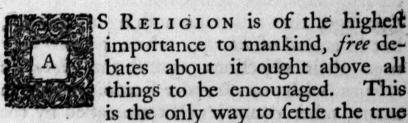
USEFULNESS, TRUTH, and EXCELLENCY

OF THE

Christian Revelation

DEFENDED. &.





nature of it, and fix it upon a folid foundation, that truth and falshood, superstition and rational piety, may not equally prevail under that venerable name: and to support it by methods of restraint and violence, is not only an infringement of the most sacred natural rights of mankind, but a difhonour to religion itself. It makes a good cause

cause suspected, and gives every little insinuation of its adversaries without proof, the air of probability. And as all honest men have no concern but for truth, and never fuffer their passions, prejudices, or worldly interests to influence their religious inquiries, they can defire nothing more than that the argument should be clearly stated, and urg'd in its utmost strength on both fides'; and must be as ready to give up any particular scheme of religion upon sufficient evidence of its falshood, as they were to defend and protagate it while they believ'd it to be true. Such persons must be very unwilling that the civil magistrate should interpose, to do that by coercion and terror, which can only be effected by reason and persuasion.

For my own part, I think it an inestimable happiness, that we live not only in an inquisitive age, that will take nothing upon trust, but in a land of liberty, where persons may urge their objections against the establish dreligion with much more freedom, than in many other countries that are called by the Christian name; in which the people, not being allow'd the use of their reason, and free inquiry, are swallowed up in the grossest enthusiasm and superstition, and slaves in a double sense, both to their Princes and their Priess. May this happy liberty increase, which I take to have a close connection even with our civil liberty. Let those who do

not believe the Christian religion be allow'd to throw off all disguises, and attack it with all the skill and strength of argument they are capable of. Let not fuch as write in defence of it claim any privilege above their opponents, merely because they write on the popular and orthodox fide of the question, fince the natural rights of both parties are equal. We need not be afraid of the consequences: for truth can never suffer by being brought to the most critical test of impartial reason; and it is the interest of mankind that falshood should be detected and exposed. And as the books which for a few years past have been publish'd in favour of Infidelity, particularly The Grounds and Reasons, &c. have been of great service to Christianity, by imploying several excellent pens in its defence, who have fet the evidence of its divine authority in a clearer and stronger light than ever; so I make no doubt but that the author of a late book intitled, Christianity as old as the Creation, will be the occasion of such folid defences of the excellency and advantages of the Christian revelation, as will establish the fincere and impartial more firmly in the belief of it. If the following discourse contributes to this good defign, it will need no farther apology.

This book, the argument of which I propose to consider so far as the cause of B 2 Chris-

Christianity is concern'd in it, is wrote in the main in a bandsome and genteel manner, and therefore, I think, the author deferves to be treated civilly. There are feveral excellent things in it, especially upon the head of natural religion. And what he has offer'd to shew the mischievous tendency of superstition, and that the true religion has been most abominably corrupted, by placing it in infignificant ceremonies, and incomprehenfible or otherwise useless speculations, which have no influence upon moral goodness but to obstruct and pervert it, is unanswerable. But as the ingenious author proceeds a great deal farther, and the main drift of his reasoning strikes directly at the truth of Christianity, and its usefulness as a divine revelation, it will be expected that his arguments upon this head should be fully consider'd; and he must not take it amiss, if this be done with the same freedom which he himself has us'd, in confidering the arguments that are urg'd on the contrary fide of the queftion. Let me only observe, that the dispute between us is not all about the supreme and immutable excellency of the religion of nature, nor whether this, which is by far the greatest and best part of Christianity, be as old as the creation, and as extensive as buman nature; it is not, whether it be the chief design of revelation, to explain and restore this primitive religion in its original purity and perfection, and to affift and promote

mote the regular and universal practice of it; nor whether reason be our ultimate rule in all our religious inquiries, a rule by which revelation itself must be judg'd: for the affirmative in all these questions is admitted. I shall therefore mention them as allow'd principles, and no farther than the nature of the argument requires; which may be reduc'd to the following heads.

Chap. I. OF the advantages of a revelation, and particularly of the Christian, and of the use and evidence of miracles.

Chap. II. VINDICATING the conduct of Providence in not making the Christian revelation universally known; and proving that this is confistent with the perfections of God, and consequently with the notion of its being a divine revelation.

Chap. III. SHEWING that we have a fufficient probability, even at this distance, of the authenticness, credibility, and purity of the books of the new testament; and that the common people are able to judge of the truth, and uncorruptedness of a traditional religion; with an answer to the arguments drawn from the change of languages, the different use of words, the stile and phrase of scripture, &c. to prove it to be an obscure, perplex'd, and uncertain rule.

Chap. IV. A GENERAL defence of post-

Chap. V. APARTICULAR vindication of the peculiar positive institutions of Christianity.

Under one or other of these heads, I shall have occasion to consider all this author's reasoning, so far as the controversy about revelation is concern'd. But if any part of it shall seem not to fall in so naturally, or in such exact order as might be wish'd, I hope it will be consider'd, that 'tis very difficult to observe strict order in remarks upon so large a book, in which the same things are often repeated; and objections are not urg'd in any regular method, but lie scatter'd here and there, and mix'd with other things of a quite different kind: and that this will obtain the candid reader's excuse.

CHAP. I.

Of the advantages of a revelation, and particularly of the Christian; and of the use and evidence of miracles.

EXPECT it will be suggested here that this part of my defign is needless, because the author of Christianity, &c. allows *, " That when men do not pay a due regard " to the most perfect religion of nature, but " mix with it human inventions, it may, then, " be agreeable to the divine goodness to send " persons to recall them to a more strict obser-" vation of it." And in another place fays +, " But first, I must premise, that in supposing " an external revelation, I take it for grant-" ed, that there is sufficient evidence of a " person being sent by God to publish it; " nay, I farther own, that this divine per-" fon by living up to what he taught, has " fet us a noble example; and that as he " was highly exalted for fo doing, fo we, if " we use our best endeavours, may expect " a fuitable reward. This, and every thing " of the same nature, I freely own, which " is not inconfistent with the law of God " being the same, whether internally, or " externally reveal'd."

* P. 283.

THESE, it must be own'd, are large concessions, but as they do not appear to be reconcileable with other parts of this author's performance, nor with the general reasoning that runs thro' the whole of it, I think they are not much to be regarded. Very ingenious writers are apt sometimes to contradict themselves; or to say things in order to disguise their sentiments, and as salvo's to which they may have recourse, if they should happen to be push'd hard in the main argument. And thus the author of Christianity, &c. has in several places spoken of the Christian religion, as if he believ'd and acknowledg'd it to be a divine revelation; tho it must appear to every reader that 'tis impossible it should be so upon bis principles, fince 'tis not a universal revelation, and contains some things in it merely positive; and consequently, that by urging these principles, he design'd to undermine it, and reduce mankind to the mere religion of reason and nature. In like manner, notwithstanding the passages above cited, nothing can be more plain, than that he magnifies the powers of reason with a view to lessen or destroy the use of revelation. But whatever his real defign was, fince the generality of his readers will most probably understand him thus, as all that I have met with do; and some perhaps may be influenc'd by his arguments, if they are not examin'd, and shewn to be weak and

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and inconclusive, to think that a revelation was needless; I look upon this as a sufficient apology for my proceeding in the method I at first propos'd, whereby I shall have an opportunity of doing justice in some measure to this important subject.

Now the fundamental principles, upon which our author proceeds, are these. " If " God has given mankind a law, he must " have given them likewise sufficient means " of knowing it; he would, otherwise, have " defeated his own intent in giving it; fince " a law, as far as 'tis unintelligible, ceases to " be a law. If God, at all times, was will-" ing that all men should come to the knowledge " of his truth; his infinite wisdom and power " could at all times find fufficient means, " for making mankind capable of know-" ing what his infinite goodness design'd " they should know." - * " If God never " intended mankind should at any time be " without religion, or have false religions; " and there be but one true religion, which " ALL have been ever bound to believe, " and profess; I can't see any heterodoxy in " affirming, that the means to effect this end " of infinite wisdom must be as universal and " extensive as the end itself; or that all men. " at all times, must have had sufficient means " to discover whatever God design'd they " should know, and practife." - And " the

" use of those faculties by which men are distinguish'd from brutes, is the only means

" they have to discern whether there is a

" God; and whether he concerns himself

" with human affairs, or has given them any

" laws; and what these laws are." +

WE may, for ought I fee, allow all this, and yet a revelation may be never the less expedient and useful. For if we suppose the utmost the ingenious author can justly expect, namely, that the reason of mankind is capable of discovering all the important principles, and precepts of natural religion, all those duties they owe to God and their fellow creatures, or which relate to the right government of their affections and appetites; and that, in this sense, 'tis sufficient to direct them how to behave in the various circumstances, and relations of human life; all that can be infer'd from hence is, that it may, but not that it certainly will produce this defirable effect. On the contrary, 'tis as plain that it may not, but that notwithstanding their rational faculties, men may be ignorant of some great and effential branches of morality. For reason can only be serviceable to us in directing our moral conduct, if it be cultivated and improv'd; and even felf-evident truths may be unknown, if they are not confider'd and attended to; and much more the principles of natural religion, of which

the utmost that can be said is, that they are capable of strict demonstrative proof, but are no knowable by intuition; so that those faculties " by which we are distinguish'd from " brutes," and which, * " if they are us'd " after the best manner we can, must an-" fwer the end for which God gave them, " and justify our conduct," may be so perverted by vitious and irregular prejudices, that the very men who are thus dignified by their reason, and capable by a right use of it of forming a true judgment of what is fit and becoming in every circumstance, may grow rude and wild, having very little sense of the eternal difference of good and evil, and being almost intirely govern'd by animal instincts and passions,

THE only thing that can render a revetion absolutely useless is this, that reason not only may, but must bring men to the knowledge of God's will; that it is not only a sufficient, but certain and infallible means to obtain this end. But this is inconfistent with their being free agents, and fit subjects of moral government, which necessarily includes in its idea, that they may choose whether they will exercise their reason, or no, and by a neglect and abuse of it fink into the most gross and deplorable ignorance. And in such a state of corruption as this (which, 'tis possible, for the very same reason that it may

happen in any fingle instance, may be universal) the advantage of a revelation will be altogether as great, as if men were unavoidably ignorant of the great truths of morality. For how they come to be out of the way is not the question, whether it proceeds from a defect in their natural powers, or from want of attention, and not using those powers as they ought. In both cases 'tis certain that they need to be fet right, and recover'd to a just sense of their duty, and happiness; and that an external revelation which rectifies their errors in points of morality, the most fatal errors that reasonable creatures can fall into, must, whatever we determine concerning the fufficiency of reason, if rightly exercis'd, to have taught them better, be eminently ufeful, and an instance of great goodness in the supreme governour of the world.

Let us explain this matter a little farther, fince 'tis of the utmost importance, and what the whole dispute about the expediency and usefulness of a revelation plainly turns upon. Florid declarations upon the sufficiency of human reason are certainly of very little weight against the general observation of mankind, and undoubted matter of fact. Now 'tis unquestionably true in fact, whatever the cause of it be, that there is nothing the bulk of mankind are more averse to, than serious thought, and consideration; and nothing

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in which we are more likely to be disappointed, than if we exspect from them, that they will fet themselves to examine and reason clearly and distinctly, even upon subjects of the greatest moment. Their indolence makes them take up with commonly receiv'd principles, and swallow them implicitly; their passions and prejudices prevent their making impartial inquiries: and tho they are reasonable creatures, constant experience teaches us, that if they are not taught, if right and just sentiments are not inculcated, and impress'd upon their minds, they are apt to run wild, and become a parcel of uncultivated undisciplined savages, possessed indeed of the powers of reafon and reflection, but without rational and well digested notions of the fundamental points of religion and morality.

For what is it but a letter education, and better instruction, that distingushes the politer parts of the world from the most ignorant and barbarous nations? Have they not ALL ALIKE the faculty of reason? And yet notwithstanding this common gift of the great Creator, and the improvements it is capable of, in some countries, knowledge and civility, just notions of God, of human nature, and of the eternal and immutable distinction of good and evil, prevail; while others are overrun with darkness and prejudice, and there is scarce any difference but in the outward form between men and brutes. Wee see plain-

ly, that in every age, and in all parts of the world, the common people, have fallen in with the established religion, however absurd and extravagant; and that they have always been tenacious of the principles of their education, whether right or wrong. In Heathen nations at this day, the most monstrous superstition and idolatry is practifed with the greatest reverence and zeal; and in Popish countries, the worst corruptions of Christianity, and even of natural religion, are embraced, and contended for, as the only scheme of belief and practice that can render men acceptable to God. The people never once suspect, that 'tis so much as possible any part of their religion may be false; but on the contrary, seem to believe, that 'tis a fin to entertain any doubts about it: which makes their errors in a manner invincible. Nay, does not our author himself allow, that mankind are very apt to be impos'd upon, and that notwithstanding the boasted sufficiency and perfection of their reason, they are easily betrayed into the most ridiculous and hurtful fuperstition, and into a belief of, and biggotted attachment to fuch principles, as undermine the foundations of religion and virtue?

THIS stupidity, and implicit submission of the understanding in religious matters, is not the peculiar foible of the present age, but was most notorious when Christianity was first published to the world. The sentiments

timents and practices of mankind were both very depraved, and the corruption was almost universal. Idolatry, one small nation only excepted, and they despis'd and bated by the rest, overspread the face of the whole earth. The common people every where, entertained the most unworthy and dishonourable notions of their Gods. The Yews represented the almighty and gracious Creator of all things, who has a kind and benevolent regard to the whole rational creation, as confining his favour to them alone, and overlooking, abandoning, and devoting to destruction all mankind besides; which made them narrow and selfish, conceited of their own fuperior privileges, and infolent and cruel to all who were not of their religion. And the poetic theology of the Heathens, which feems to have been their establish'd religion, and the general belief of the vulgar, imputed to their deities the groffest impurities, and most infamous immoralities, such as murders, rapes, incests, and other the most black and monstrous crimes; which had a natural tendency to corrupt the manners of their worshippers, and gave a sanction to the worst of vices. And accordingly in the politest nations, some of the facred rites which were folemnized in honour of the Gods, were fo abominably leud and bestial, as to raise the utmost horror in every mind that has a sense of virtue or decency.

NAY, even a confiderable part of that public-spiritedness, and love of their country; for which they are fo highly celebrated, was nothing else but a zeal for their own particular interest, in opposition to the general good of the world. It was a rude and barbarous ambition to aggrandize themselves, by conquering, oppressing and enslaving other nations. And of consequence, their fortitude, contempt of danger, and the like, which in the support of an interest that is truly bonourable, and in afferting and defending the common rights of mankind are great and beroic virtues, becoming the dignity of human nature, being animated by fuch baje views, and exerted in so unjust a cause, were very mischievous qualities, destructive of the true principles of focial vertue and happiness. Indeed they eminently distinguish'd themselves by a noble ardour and zeal for civil liberty at home, and by the many brave efforts they made against arbitrary and tyrannical schemes for enflaving, and oppressing their own country; at the same time that they were a faction against the natural rights and liberties of mankind, and spread flavery and terror thro' the world. But, tho I would be far from difparaging this brave and useful spirit, I cannot help observing, that an attachment to the true interests of any one society, however excellent in its constitution, laws, and customs, is but a low attainment in comparison of a

Christian revelation defended. 17

love to the whole community of mankind, and a concern for universal liberty, and happiness; nay, it may proceed in a great meafure from felfish principles, the happiness of particular persons, of their families, and posterity, being necessarily included in that of the fociety of which they are members; and there is too much reason to suspect, that there was actually fomething of this in the case of the old Greeks and Romans, since by their arms and conquests they not only violated, in the most notorious manner, the law of difinterested and universal benevolence, but even the common rules of justice and equity. Many more instances might be added, of the deplorable corruption of religion and morality in the world, before our Saviour's appearance. And,

I MAY ask now, where was that clear light of reason all this while, the univer-sality of which, and its sufficiency, at all times, to direct men in every branch of their duty is so much insisted upon, in order to represent an external revelation as altogether needless? Was it not very much clouded and obscured; and were not the notices it gave vastly imperfect and confus'd, with respect to the very fundamental principles of true piety and virtue?

IT must indeed be owned, that God did not leave bimself intirely without witness in

the Gentile world; having not only implanted in all the faculty of reason, but raised up, at different times, several persons of a more refin'd genius, who cultivated their understanding with great care and diligence, saw thro' the idolatry and enthusiasm of the vulgar, and made confiderable improvements in the knowledge of morality. But notwithstanding this, ignorance and superstition triumphed among the common people, infinitely the greatest part of mankind, without controul. So that the state and circumstances of the world in general plainly required the extraordinary affistance of a revelation, to recover mankind to the knowledge of the one true God, the maker and governour of the universe, and to just and worthy notions of his perfections and providence; to restore religion to its native purity and lustre, which was buried, and almost quite lost under a heap of absurd and extravagant rites and ceremonies, many of which were shocking to modesty, and scandalous to human nature; and to fettle morality, and the focial virtues themselves upon their true and proper foundation.

I THINK it will be but little to the purpose to ask here, whether philosophy was not sufficient to reform the world, without the help of a particular revelation from heaven? For the same may be said of philosophy as of the reason of mankind in general,

neral, that whatever it was capable of in the abstract nature of the thing, 'tis plain in fact it did not answer this end. And farther, there was very little reason to expect this desireable effect from it. For very few of the people had either leisure or inclination to attend the schools of the philosophers; or if they had, their lectures of morality were not plain simple precepts, adapted to vulgar understandings, but such abstract reafonings as are above the capacity of the generality of mankind; and which, very probably, instead of fixing them in clear and distinct principles, would have puzzled and confounded their natural notions of good and evil. The greatest reformation that philofophy seems, in fact, to have brought about in the most civiliz'd nations, was the introducing wifer schemes of government, for the prefervation of outward order, and the peace of fociety. But as the most excellent laws which were enacted with a view to this. doubtless a truly laudable design, aim'd at nothing farther than regulating the external behaviour, and did not extend to the difpofitions of the mind, and the inward principles of action, nor prescribe rules for the right government of the passions, in which alone the effence of true virtue confifts; scarce any thing was really done, whatever we allow it possible that philosophy might have done, towards promoting the perfection of mankind, and shewing them their duty, as reasonable and accountable creatures.

HOWEVER, let us suppose, tho we have no reason in the world to believe that it was really the case, that the common people actually learn'd from their philosephers the justest notions of their duty towards their fellow-creatures. With respect to religion they were intirely under the conduct and government of their priests; who enflav'd their understandings to such enthufiaftic principles, inculcated fuch weak and impious stories of their gods, and impo-. fed fo many ridiculous, and fome fuch fenfual and barbarous rites in their worship, as having a direct tendency to corrupt their manners, must of consequence render their knowledge of morality, had it been ever fo exact, in a great measure useles. With these fundamental errors in religion, subversive of all true piety, and of the obligations of moral virtue, philosophy did but little concern itself. And yet 'tis undeniable, that in these points the bulk of the world most needed a reformation, because their religion gave a low and vitious turn to their minds, and very much defac'd their natural conscience of good and evil. On the contrary, the philosophers, generally speaking, tho they might fecretly despise, and laugh at the idolatry, weakness, and credulity of the people, whether for want of honesty, or courage, or because they thought it a piece of state-convenience and policy, that the vulgar should be kept in ignorance, rather encourag'd than attempted to put

put a stop to it, by falling in with the establish'd superstition. Thus did their example give a kind of sanction and authority to the general corruption; the admirers of their superior wisdom were plung'd deeper into it; and there was less likelihood, perhaps, than if there had never been any philosophers at all, of their extricating themselves out of it.

AND, not to infift upon their want of proper authority to enforce their doctrines, and get them to be receiv'd as laws binding conscience, and standing unalterable rules for the conduct of mankind; the differences there were amongst them even with respect to some principles of morality; and several other circumstances that might be mentioned, which plainly shew how utterly improbable 'tis, that philosophy, if left to itself, would have reform'd the errors and vices of the world; I shall only add, that the bulk of mankind, instead of being establish'd in the belief of a future state, by the sentiments and reasonings of the philosophers about it, were more likely to be unsettled and lost in confufion. For the vulgar feem to have been the only firm and steady believers of this great article of natural religion; while, of the philosophers some denied, and others doubted of it, and the wifest and best did not think and argue clearly and confiftently upon this important subject: but tho they sometimes spoke of a future immortality with great plain-

ness, and with an air of confidence, as a thing of which they were strongly persuaded, they deliver'd themselves at other times with the utmost besitation and uncertainty.

INDEED the notions which prevailed among the generality concerning a future state of rewards and punishments, being little else but poetical tales and fictions, design'd rather to amuse and strike the imagination, than to give a rational account of things, were in many respects childish and trifling. And it was bighly defireable, for the honour of the divine wisdom, and the greater encouragement of virtue, that fuch false notions should be rectify'd. But how was this to be done? Surely it could not be by applying to the uncertain light of philosophy, and submitting to the direction of such unstable guides as had not so much as fix'd their own principles, without an equal, or perhaps greater inconvenience; because, tho they might by their superior reason have given the people juster sentiments of a future state, they would have left them in doubt about the thing itself. And from scepticism with respect to this great principle of natural religion, and, which is the direct consequence or it, infidelity (the common people, generally, not being exact enough to distinguish between doubting and not believing at all) no good effect could possibly follow: but the belief of it, tho in some particulars very idle and romantic, might excite

excite many, especially of the lower fort, as far as they had clear notions of their duty, to regard and practise it.

AND now in fuch an universal degeneracy, when mankind were abandon'd to the groffest idolatry, and fwallow'd up in ignorance and superstition, and had scarce any remains of the true uncorrupted religion of nature; when the powers of reason and philosophy were either not employ'd to restore them to their original state, or after they had done their utmost were found to be ineffectual; and tho they dispers'd some good notions of civility, order, and decency in outward life, contributed but very little towards regulating the principles of morality, and fettling religion upon its rational and just foundation; nay, farther, when, all circumstances consider'd, there was fo little likelihood that a reformation could come from this quarter: I fay, in fuch a state of corruption as this, nothing of which, I am perfuaded, has been exaggerated, and amplify'd beyond the truth, but rather feveral particulars omitted, that would give us a stronger idea of the deplorable condition into which the world was funk; who, that has any notion of the importance of religion, and its tendency to promote the happiness of mankind, will pretend to say, that a revelation was not extremely defireable, and might not be of the greatest advantage? or that the Christian revelation in particular, which

which made such momentous discoveries, and discoveries that were so much wanted, relating to the unity of God, the rational and acceptable method of worshipping him, and the truths of natural religion, which were so generally corrupted and darken'd, was not a singular instance of God's great goodness to his creatures, and worthy to be receiv'd with the utmost gratitude and thankfulness?

THIS point is fo plain, that 'tis almost a shame to enlarge upon it. Let a man speculate ever fo finely upon the natural sufficiency of reason, will that convince us, when we look abroad into the world, and confider the folly and enthufiasm that generally abounds, that men may not in fact be stupidly ignorant of those things, which it most of all concerns them to know? Will reason, if it be not improved and cultivated, carry them any farther than mere sense and instinct? Or is a capacity of thinking and confidering, a probability that they will think and confider? Is it an argument that they do, in opposition to the unanimous sense of all ages and nations? May not a revelation then, when men have fuffer'd their reason to be perverted, fo that really, whatever it might have done, it affords them no light whereby to discover the principles of true religion, be in all respects as useful as if they were naturally incapable of forming right notions of their duty without it? May it not be

be very useful, tho it be not absolutely necessary to the happiness of mankind? i. e. Tho we should allow, that the great governour of the world requires of none to know more, than may fairly be expected from persons in their circumstances, and surrounded with their particular difficulties and prejudices, for which all favourable allowances will be made; and that their acting up to the light they enjoy, however imperfect, is sufficient to procure his approbation and favour.

INDEED the author of Christianity &c. feems to be of opinion, " that the greatest " part of mankind cannot be in a deplorable " condition for want of a revelation, which " God, out of his infinite wisdom, has not " as yet thought fit to communicate to them: " at least with that evidence as is necessary " to make them believe it *." If it be, because they are capable by their reason of difcovering those rules, that are sufficient for their present and future happiness, which is the substance of what he has advanc'd in the preceding paragraph, 'tis evident that this will not support the principle which he would build upon it. For notwithstanding this, men may be ignorant of some of the most effential branches of natural religion, which without doubt is a very deplorable condition for reasonable beings to be in,

if they are brought into it by their own negligence and carelefness.

IT may be faid however, that in this case 'tis not owing to the want of a revelation, but to the not exercifing their rational faculties aright. Granting this, is their state ever the less deplorable? And may not the corruption be so great, and so universal, as that there may be but little probability of their being recover'd out of it without the help of a revelation? which is all that is, or at least that needs to be contended for. And if a revelation may rectify those disorders, which otherwise are likely to continue, and to be more and more establish'd, and by the continuance of which mankind must be in very unbappy circumstances; may it not be justly faid that they are in a deplorable condition for want of a revelation? The meaning of which expression is plainly no more than this, that they are in fuch deplorable circumstances, that they very much want a revelation to fet them right; or at most, that 'tis probable they will remain in that deplorable condition, into which they have involved themselves by their negligence and vice, if God does not vouchfafe them that extraordinary favour. And to suppose the advocates for revelation to mean by a phrase which is fairly capable of another sense, that the want of a revelation is the cause why any are in a deplorable condition, when they constantly

stantly ascribe it to other causes, such as the neglect and abuse of reason, prejudice, vicious passions perverting and darkening the understanding, and the like; and only assign the general ignorance and corruption of the world, which all the refinements of philosophy either could not or did not reform, as a reason why a revelation was an unspeakable advantage to it; is playing with words, and mere cavilling.

But perhaps the ingenious author may think, that because God requires no more of his creatures, than in proportion to the light and advantages they enjoy; and will make all the allowances that can be expected from an infinitely wise and merciful governour, to their unhappy circumstances, and the unavoidable prejudices they labour under; and "men of all reli-" gions whatever, if equally sincere, have the "same title to be equally favour'd by him *;" mankind cannot be in deplorable circumstances for want of a revelation. Let us therefore consider the matter a little in this view.

AND I can see no manner of reason to doubt but that 'tis possible men may be sincere, and yet be ignorant of some which we account plain, and which are essential principles of natural religion; that in the Heathen world, some were sincere who practised idolatry; and in Popish countries many of the common people are very sincere, notwith-

^{*} Christianity as old, &c. p. 415.

standing their ignorance and superstition; or in other words, that their prejudices are, if not invincible, confidering the manner of their education, their circumstances in the world, the influence of example, custom, and the like; fuch however, as truly bonest well-meaning men who defign right, and act right in proportion to their knowledge, may be influenced by. If our author allows this, as he must do, or else be so uncharitable as to condemn all the ignorant, idolatrous, and fuperstitious people that ever lived in the world, as wilful corrupters of the light of reason, and consequently in a hopeless state; the only question that remains is, whether notwithstanding their fincerity, which will excuse their ignorance, and recommend them to the favour of God, their condition (tho not absolutely wretched and miserable upon the whole, which this author knows was never intended by the most rational advocates for revelation) may not be justly styled deplorable? Or in other words, whether, besides its being a thing much to be lamented, that reasonable creatures should reap little or no advantage from their reason in the most important points, and fall into fuch fentiments and practices as are contrary to its plainest dictates, and dishonourable to human nature, it be not attended with fuch real and great inconveniences, as may render a revelation that instructs in juster and more useful principles, very advantageous and serviceable to them?

AND

AND either this must be admitted, or it can be no advantage at all to mankind to have just apprehensions of the nature and perfections of God, rational notions of religion in all its branches, and an exact knowledge of the obligations, and true principles of morality; but it must be the same thing in all respects as to its influence upon their happiness, provided they are fincere, whether they are governed by enthufiasm, or true piety; whether their minds are improved by their devotion, or debased; whether they practise their intire duty to God and their fellowcreatures, and understand the just measures of both, so as never to suffer them to clash and interfere with each other; or resolve the whole of religion into a blind, senseles superstition, setting it above real and substantial goodness, and the immutable rules of virtue: or in short, whether they are funk almost down to the level of brutes, or think and act in all cases becoming the dignity of their nature. But will any one take upon him to advance, and maintain fuch a wild paradox as this? Can fuch espouse it with any confiftency, who profess a mighty zeal for the fimplicity and purity of religion, and make loud outcries against the mischievous consequences of superstition, and its natural tendency to destroy the perfection, and true happiness of mankind? Without doubt, in the opinion of fuch especially, the superstitious

tious in all ages, whether fincere or infincere, must have been in the most deplorable circumstances; and a revelation to dispel their ignorance, and restore to them the original religion of nature, must have been as great a blessing as could be conferred upon them.

THE thing that is apt to lead men into mistakes in this matter is their imagining, that because " men of all religions what-" ever, if equally fincere, have the same title " to be equally favoured by God, they will " be equally rewarded, or enjoy an equal de-" gree of happiness in the future state." Equally rewarded indeed they will be in proportion to the improvements they have made, and the services they have performed; but notwithstanding this, the degrees of their future happiness may be very various and unequal. Nay, I think, in the reason and equity of the thing, it must be so: Or in other words, we must distinguish between the reward of men's fincerity which will be equal; and the reward of real useful virtue. and actual fervices, which, at the same time, we have the greatest reason to believe, will be very different. For,

I. Two men may be equally fincere, and yet moral dispositions and babits, benevolent dispositions for instance, may be much stronger, and more perfect in one, than in the other. They may be improved in the one by a more large

large and generous education, a more clear and exact knowledge of his duty, and by just and amiable sentiments of the deity; and in the other very much obstructed and limited by unhappy prejudices, and the influence of a blind superstition. Nay, false notions of religion, and conceiving of God as an illnatur'd, partial, arbitrary, or inexorable being, (and there are multitudes in the world, of whom, confidering all circumstances, it can hardly be expected that they should form better notions) may corrupt mens sense of morality to a great degree, and make them baughty and infolent, morose, rigid, and unsociable. And where these cases happen, as I make no doubt they do frequently, if moral dispositions are the perfection of human nature, and the only foundation of rational happiness, the capacity for happiness must, in the nature of things, be very different. Stating the matter thus, the different capacity does not depend on bodily organs, as the author of Christianity &c. infinuates +, but on the temper and babit of the mind; which there is no reason to suppose will be altered in the very instant that men enter upon the separate state; or that those, in whom the growth and improvement of moral dispositions has in this life, by accidental circumstances only been greatly obstructed, will find themselves all at once possessed of them in the same strength and perfection as others, who en-

joying better opportunities and advantages, have cultivated them to the utmost.

2. Two persons may be equally fincere, and yet the services justly expected from them may be vastly different. The one, in proportion to his larger knowledge and higher advantages, is obliged to be more extensively useful, and to exercise more care and labour in doing good. And where the actual services which men are called to perform are very unequal, which may oftentimes subject the one to much greater difficulties and inconveniences than the other, can it be supposed that there will be a perfect equality in the reward? At this rate, there is indeed no reward at all for the most generous services, nor even for the greatest sufferings to promote the good of mankind (in which virtue may be very far from being its own reward) if persons who have done and fuffered nothing, will be rewarded in the same degree, merely for their equal fincerity, and because they would probably have behaved in the same manner if they had been placed in the same circumstances. This principle therefore is a discouragement to virtuous actions, as well as a reflection upon the wisdom and justice of the governour of the world. To which we may add that moral dispositions and habits, as it is the nature of all habits, are improved and strengthned by more frequent opportu-nities for the exercise of them; and consequently

Christian revelation defended. 33' quently the natural capacity for happiness must be enlarged in proportion.

3. As those who have a more complete and distinct knowledge of their duty, will, if they fail in it, be more severely punished than others who enjoy less light, and fewer advantages for improving in virtue; as this, I say, is right and fit, and a principle of natural justice; there can no equal proportion be observed, if upon discharging their duty faithfully, they are not intitled to a higher reward. Nay, upon the contrary supposition, the less we know, not only of revelation but of natural religion, the better. For if we are fincere, and act up to our light, and to what is required of us in our particular circumstances, be it ever so little, we are sure of an equal reward; and out of all danger of the additional punishment, that will be inflicted for misimprovement of superior knowledge.

Upon the whole, therefore, a revelation, by instructing men in right notions of religion, and in the whole of their duty, and affording them better opportunities and advantages for cultivating moral dispositions, for greater usefulness in the world, and confequently for obtaining bigher degrees of happiness hereafter, may be of unspeakable use; and the ignorant, and superstitious, tho they will be accepted of God if they are fincere,

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34 The usefulness and truth of the may justly be said to be in a deplorable condition for want of it.

In order to represent a revelation as needless, our author proceeds farther, and tells us, *, that " had God, from time to time, " fpoke to all mankind in their feveral lan-" guages, and his words had miraculoufly " conveyed the same ideas to all persons; " yet he could not speak more plainly than " he has done by the things themselves, and " the relation which reason sheweth there is " between them." But when men do not attend to the nature of things, the case is very much the same as if God had not spoke to them at all. And a revelation may certainly be very useful to teach them those principles, and duties of natural religion, which, notwithstanding it was in their power to have discover'd, if they had made a right ule of their reason, they are in fact grosly ignorant of. If one man endeavours to rectify the mistakes of another in points of morality, must such instructions be impertinent? nay, are they ever the less necessary, because God has spoke the same truths clearly by the nature of things, tho his voice be not heard? A man that does not hear or fee, has as much need of instruction as if he was naturally deaf or blind.

BESIDES, when God speaks to all mankind, and his words miraculously convey the same ideas to all, this is giving them an actual knowledge of their duty; whereas in the other case, there is, at most, only a capacity to discover it; i. e. they may know it, or they may not; because their knowledge must be intirely the refult of their own study, and impartial inquiry. And,

A STANDING revelation, tho men may indeed pervert it, as well as darken the light of reason, and be as ignorant, superstitious, and degenerate, as if it had never been communicated to them; I say, a standing revelation, if it be free to the use of all, and frequently confulted, must in the nature of the thing be a more probable security, with refpect to the bulk of mankind, against gross errors and corruptions, than the leaving them altogether to the direction and conduct of their own reason: because it will constantly supply them with proper thoughts, which is what the common people in all ages have most wanted. For the the right exercise of their rational faculties may be fufficient to give them just notions of God, and of the great effential principles of religion; yet this requires more confideration than they generally care for. And experience teaches us, that they make but little of it, when they are left to find out the rules of morality for them-

themselves. Indolence, want of use, and the attention of their minds to the necessary bufiness, and the pleasures of life, hinder their making any great proficiency; and being inclined, to fave themselves the trouble of thinking, to be implicit in their belief, they are easily practised upon, and led into the most dangerous and hurtful superstition. All which inconveniences are in a great meafure provided against by a standing revelation, which prescribes a plain, intelligible, and complete rule of morals: fo that if they will but be at the pains to read it carefully, which is what they will be fooner perfuaded to, than to think so much as is necessary to discover every part of it by their own reason, the meanest may be so well acquainted with the perfections of God, and the nature of true religion, as to guard against the two extremes, of irreligion on the one hand, and enthusiasm and superstition on the other.

And whereas it is urged farther, that "fince 'tis impossible in any book, or books, "a particular rule could be given for every "case, we must even then," i.e. upon the supposition, that God had spoken to all mankind in their several languages, and his words had miraculously conveyed the same ideas to all persons, "have had recourse to the light of "nature to teach us our duty in most cases; "especially considering the numberless cir"cumstances which attend us, and which, "per-

" perpetually varying, may make the fame " actions, according as men are differently " affected by them, either good or bad *; this amounts to no more, than that all revelation can do for us, is to lay down the general principles, and rules of conduct in all circumstances, but that we must consult our reason about the application of these general rules to particular cases; which is granted, but does not, as every one must see, in the least affect the present argument. For a man who has the most exact and perfect knowledge of natural religion, has only in his mind general principles, and not a particular rule for every circumstance that may happen. These general principles alone are the eternal, and immutable law of nature. And therefore, if our knowledge of natural religion, i.e. of the general rules to be observed in our behaviour towards God, and our fellowcreatures, and in governing our affections and appetites, be a great advantage to us, notwithstanding we are obliged to the constant use of our reason, in order to judge with respect to particular actions, whether or no they agree with these general rules, for instance, whether they are just or unjust, beneficent or burtful; the knowledge of a revelation that teaches all the same general principles, which for the most part are very eafily accommodated to circumstances, must be an equal advantage. I forbear enlarging, be-

cause it would need an apology to spend much time upon such objections.

BUT the author of Christianity &c. " thinks it no compliment to external reve-" lation, tho, as he adds, the learned Dr. " Clarke defigned it as the highest, to say it " prevailed, when the light of nature was in " a manner extinct *." The plain fense of which is, that 'tis no compliment to external revelation, to say it was given at a season when it must be most useful, or that God could not wifely and bonourably interpose to reveal his will to mankind, when their notions of natural religion were corrupted and depraved; and confequently that he could never do it at all, fince in any other circumstance of the world a revelation is plainly needless. Let us however consider the weight of the reason which is assigned for this, viz. that " then an irrational religion might as " eafily obtain as a rational one +. Suppose it might, is that an argument that Christianity is not a rational religion? If it be not, as every one must see there is not the least shadow of an argument in it, to what purpose is it urged?

THE only question that can affect the credit of the Christian revelation is this, whether mankind might not be convinced, upon

* P. 381.

† Ibid.

rational

rational grounds, of its truth and excellency, notwithstanding their general corruption and depravity; and that they had in a great measure lost the knowledge of the true religon of nature? If it be shewn, that in fuch a degenerate state of the world sufficient evidence might be given, that Christianity was a religion most worthy of God, and calculated to promote the perfection and highest happiness of mankind; of what importance is it to inquire, whether or no it be possible that they might have been prevailed upon to embrace an abjurd and irrational religion, if God had permitted evil spirits to work miracles to confirm and establish it? The Christian religion might have been never the less of divine authority, tho mens corruptions and vicious prejudices had determined them to reject it; and an irrational religion would not have been at all proved to have proceeded from God, tho it had been universally received. The truth or falshood of any religion cannot be argued therefore from the opinions which men happen to entertain concerning it, and does not in the least depend upon their prejudices; but is to be judged of only by its own intrinsic wisdom and goodness, and its having the proper external credentials of a divine revelation. And if notwithstanding their ignorance, superstition, and the false notions they have conceived, men may still be convinced that it has all necessary external credentials, and is in every D 4

part of it just, wise, and rational; 'tis evident it may prevail honourably, whatever deceptions we suppose them liable to, even of the most gross and dangerous nature.

Put the case that the world is universally corrupted; that they have not only lost the knowledge of the one true God, and practife the most stupid idolatry, but entertain the most abjurd and dishonourable notions of the Gods whom they worship; that they attribute to their Deities the weaknesses and imperfections of human nature; and conceive of them as unjust, arbitrary, cruel, and revengeful; pleased and offended with trifles; and preferring the follies and extravagancies of a deluded and fanciful superstition, which debases the dignity of human nature, before folid and real goodness; and that in consequence of this, their sense of good and evil, and of the principles and obligations of morality, is very much vitiated and darkened, and they are led to look upon religion as a thing absolutely distinct from virtue, and to resolve the whole of it into ridiculous tricks, and idle ceremonies. It will be very hard, if in fuch deplorable circumstances the great God cannot bonourably interpose, and by an extraordinary revelation, which without doubt is the most desireable advantage that can be afforded to his degenerate creatures, recover them to right sentiments of their duty and happiness. And it cannot but be the wish of every

every generous mind, that if possible, some remedy might be applied to cure so great an evil. Let us consider therefore, whether what every wise and good man must desire might be, may not be.

Now when mankind are funk thus low; when they have in a manner lost the religion of nature; and those principles which they retain somewhat of are so perverted, as to be of very little use to them, and indeed to make it a question, whether they are any thing better than no religion at all; an extraordinary messenger is sent from God, who works very great and unquestionable miracles. These miracles strike their minds, and convince them that there is fomething uncommon in this person's commission. They both demand and engage their attention to the doctrine he teaches, and counterballance their prejudices in favour of the superstition in which they were educated; so that they are prevailed upon to examine this new religion with care and impartiality,

MAY not then the doctrines of it, if they are plain, important, and useful, and intirely agreeable to reason, approve themselves to the understandings of rational beings, how corrupt soever their former opinions and principles were? May they not, if they will think, and exercise those intellectual faculties with which God hath endued their nature,

come to the knowledge of the one supreme Creator and Governour of all things, and form rational and worthy notions of his perfections and providence; and of all the necesfary branches of true religion, and morality? May they not be recovered out of their ignorance and fuperstition? Or are the reafonable creatures of God, when they have once corrupted the religion of nature, in a remediless state? Because they may be deluded, and imposed upon, and grow worse and worse; is it impossible they should use their reason aright? Because a false religion may eafily be obtruded upon them, while they are under the influence of strong prejudices; ought the true religion, of the worth and excellency of which they must be capable of being convinced, if their reason be any thing more than an empty name, and which instructs them in the most useful knowledge, and rectifies their moral diforders, to be the less respected? Or because truth and error if equally recommended by fupernatural operations, or by the artful management of a cunning impostor, may equally prevail; does it follow, that the truth cannot be received upon rational evidence? Does this render knowledge and virtue ever the less worthy, and bonourable, or ignorance and vice ever the less infamous, and burtful? Must we therefore confound and destroy the eternal and immutable differences of things?

'Tis certainly a very great mistake to suppose, that men cannot judge of the truth, and divine authority of any particular revelation, unless they have in their minds, antecedently to its being proposed to their consideration, just and worthy notions of God, and of the great principles and duties of natural religion. And yet this fentiment feems to run through our author's whole book. And I expect indeed that it will be asked, how 'tis possible, in the nature of the thing itself, that we should fet about determining rationally, whether a revelation be worthy of God, if we do not know beforehand what fort of a being God is; and if instead of conceiving of him as immutably wife, just, and good, we form false and dishonourable apprehensions even of his moral character? Or how we can be capable of knowing whether or no it agrees with natural religion, if before we begin to examine it, we do not thoroughly understand what natural religion means? And on the other hand, it may be faid, that if we have already formed right and becoming conceptions of the perfections of the Deity, and believe what the religion of nature teaches concerning our duty to God and our fellow-creatures, and the necessary means in order to obtain the perfection and happiness of our reasonable nature, without which we cannot judge that any particular scheme of reveal'd religion is fit to be received, and fubmitted

44 The usefulness and truth of the submitted to, a revelation must be superfluous, and needless.

I ANSWER, that the faculty of reason which God hath implanted in mankind, however it may have been neglected and abufed in times past, will, whenever they begin to exercise it aright, enable them to judge of all these things. As by means of this, they were capable of discovering at first the being and perfections of God, and that he governs the world with absolute wisdom, equity, and goodness, and what those duties are which they owe to him, and to one another; they must be as capable, if they will divest themselves of prejudice, and reason impartially, of rectifying any mistakes which they may have fallen into about these important points. Their noble powers of thought and reflection, if they can enable them to find out truth, must be fufficient, if they make a right use of them, to recover them from error. It matters not whether they have hitherto thought right or wrong, nor indeed whether they have thought at all; let them but begin to confider feriously, and examine carefully and impartially, and they must be able to find out all those truths, which as reasonable creatures they are capable of knowing, and which necessarily affect their duty and happiness. They will foon come to form just notions in general of a religion that is worthy of God; and consequently be fit to judge, whether

any particular revelation be worthy of him. And to suppose otherwise, is only to make reason serviceable in forming our first sentiments about religion: but if we pervert it, and set out wrong, our errors are incurable; and this most excellent, and distinguishing gift of the great Creator, which is the highest mark of our dignity above the mere animal world, is render'd for ever use-less.

THE persons who are in this way of thinking feem to have but confus'd ideas, when they speak of mankind as reasonable creatures, capable of discerning the differences of things; and this makes them talk inconfistently about it. For instance, when reason is to be magnified in order to represent a revelation as needless, then it can do mighty things; it is fufficient to teach men all the principles of natural religion, and the whole of their duty; nay, tho it has been ever fo much corrupted and darkened, and men are become ever so ignorant, enthusiastical, and superstitious, it is still in their power, by the right use of their natural faculties, to discover all abuses, to rectify all their errors, and attain to just and rational notions of religion. But at other times, the quite contrary is maintained with a view to the same end, to discredit, and run down revelation. viz. that the mere capacity of reasoning does not qualify men to judge whether a religion

be rational, and worthy of God; but they must actually have in their minds, before they set themselves to consider, and determine this point, right conceptions of God, and of the laws of reason by which revelation is to be tried. This shifting of principles as the exigency of the case requires, plainly shews, that the greatest pretenders to reason are not intirely to be depended upon.

'Tis almost needless, after such concessions of our adversaries, however they may upon other occasions contradict themselves, and after what has been argued already from the nature of the thing itself, to add any thing more upon this head; I shall, notwithstanding, pursue the matter a little farther. And in my opinion 'tis so far from being necessary, in order to our judging rationally of the truth and goodness of a revelation, that we come to the inquiry with just sentiments of God, and of the general nature of true religion; that I very much question whether an atheist may not, by means of it, be convinced even of the being of a God. For the a person of this character, having now only the history of certain extraordinary and wonderful works performed in confirmation of the Christian religion, may laugh at the doctrine of miracles, and look upon the belief of them as ignorant and enthufiastic credulity; yet I believe, if we consider how much more strongly human nature is wrought upon by fenfible proofs,

proofs, than by a traditional account of things, we shall make no difficulty of allowing, that 'tis very possible, if he had this evidence, he might entertain quite different thoughts of them.

LET us suppose then, that he actually faw very great miracles wrought; that he had opportunities of examining them carefully; and that he was fully convinced upon the most diligent search, that they were above all the known powers of nature, and contrary to the established course of things, and confequently was fure, not only that they were not juggling tricks, but that he was not imposed on by one who knew better than himself, the secret and invisible operations of natural causes: suppose, tor example, that he faw a person whom he knew to be dead, and who had been buried feveral days, restored to life again, and conversed with him for a confiderable time together; or heard others, whom he knew to be wholly illiterate, speak all of a sudden, easily, and fluently, various languages. I will not take upon me to fay, that these things are impossible to be accounted for, if there be not an infinite mind, the Creator and Governour of the universe, or consequently, that they are, strictly speaking, a demonstration of the existence of a Deity; but may they not have this effect upon him, to make him grave and confiderate? May he not conclude, upon feeing

feeing fuch extraordinary appearances, that 'tis at least worth his while to think a little, whether there be a God, and whether there be any thing in religion, or no? The furprize and awe, with which men are naturals ly struck at such great and unexpected events, has a tendency to correct the levity of their minds, which leads to an utter dissipation of thought, and consequently to scepticism and infidelity in points of the greatest moment. And when they grow ferious, and begin to reason coolly, and deliberately, there is no danger of their continuing atheists long: the existence of a supreme and infinite Being who made, and governs the world, being one of the first truths the human understanding discovers, and the evidences of it plain, and level to all capacities. And a little impartial reflection will bring men as easily to form right and honourable conceptions of God, especially with respect to his moral perfections; and consequently teach them what scheme of religion is most worthy of, and acceptable to him.

And indeed the truth of all this is necesfarily supposed, by every attempt that is made by wise and rational men, who do not pretend to a particular commission from heaven, to reform the errors and vices of the world. The author of Christianity &c. for instance, lamenting the ignorance and superstition in which a great part of mankind are involved; their

their unworthy notions of God, which tend to taint and deprave their minds; and gross corruptions of natural religion, and morality, in the regular practice of which, both the happiness of private persons, and of civil societies is so nearly concerned, has wrote a large book, to recover them from their enthusiasm and delusion to a rational piety and virtue. And must they not, in order to receive any benefit from so kind and generous a defign, be capable of judging of every part of it? Must they not be able to discern, whether the religion he recommends is worthy of God? But how shall they come to know this? If while they conceive of the divine Being as capricious and bumour some, arbitrary and tyrannical, unjust and cruel; and of religion as a thing that confifts in trifling ceremonies, and unintelligible mysteries, and not in the right government of the paffions, and the plain and useful duties of a good life, they make these false opinions the standard and rule of their judgment; it is impossible they should rectify their mistakes. And is there no way in which they can be brought to think more justly? Without doubt there is, and must be: otherwise, the endeavours of this author, and of all others, to instruct the ignorant and superstitious, are wild and fantastical. And what else can it be, but the right use of those powers which God hath given them, to distinguish between truth and falshood; and especially to discover moral truths.

truths, and the principles of natural religion, which are of the utmost consequence to their happiness? As therefore I apprehend, that the author of Christianity &c. would have just reason to complain, if any should say, " that it was no compliment" to his book to suppose, that the principles contained in it, however true and rational, prevailed amongst those who had grosly corrupted the great truths and duties of natural religion, and confequently in whom " the light of nature was " in a manner extinct," i.e. amongst those, with a view to whose advantage chiefly it was wrote; I cannot but think, that there is equal ground of complaint, whether of inadvertency, or difingenuity, when the same thing is said upon the very same account, concerning the Christian revelation.

The ingenious author will forgive me if I add farther, that an external revelation seems much better calculated to reform the world in such degenerate circumstances, than the most judicious and accurate labours of any private man whatsoever; for the most excellent buman composures may be neglected, or read with carelesness and partiality, for want of some previous recommendation, that is sufficient to bear down mens prejudices in favour of a contrary scheme. But miracles bespeak their attention so strongly to the doctrines of revelation, that they set themselves to examine them as points of great importance,

importance, which they are, in a particular manner, called upon to confider. And thus they may easily learn those truths by means of a revelation, which otherwise, thro' indolence preventing free and impartial confideration; or superstition, a regard to tradition, custom, and the like, perverting and darkening their minds, they might always have continued ignorant of: even the plainest, and most useful truths, which they may be hinder'd from discovering by the causes above-mention'd, or others of a like nature; but which, when they are inquired into with ingenuity and candour, soon gain the assent of the understanding.

I SHALL conclude this chapter with a more particular confideration of the use of miracles, in answer to this question, how far they are an evidence of the truth of any religion, and that the person who teaches it is fent by God? And in my opinion, 'tis not rational to suppose, that miracles alone, and apart from all other confiderations, are an abfolute, and decisive proof of the truth and divinity of any revelation, but confider'd with ALL their circumstances; either as they attest a wife and boly doctrine, a doctrine worthy of God, calculated to promote the moral perfection and happiness of mankind, and wifely fuited to the condition and necesfities of those, for whose use it is particularly defigned: or else, as they are friendly and beneficent E 2

beneficent miracles, and bear upon them the strongest characters of wisdom and goodness, as well as power; and consequently cannot, without the utmost absurdity, and most manifest contradiction to the nature of things, be look'd upon as the operations of evil spirits. For,

I. It cannot, I think, be disputed, that fuperior created beings may be capable of performing real miracles; or in other words, that they may enable a man to do such things as are above the ordinary powers of human nature, and produce effects by an invisible operation, which vastly exceed the natural agency of the immediate, and visible instruments. Again,

II. As we know not what degrees of power fuch superior beings may be possessed of, nor consequently the utmost they are capable of performing, we can have no certain, nor even probable rule, in most cases at least, whereby to distinguish what operations are properly divine, and what are not so. We cannot from the effects themselves conclude that they are wrought by God, because we are not able to shew that they are above the powers which he has given to other beings; so that the making miracles the sole proof of a divine revelation, of which, by themselves, they can be no proof at all, unless we have

a probability at least, that they surpass the skill and agency of all created beings, must render their evidence very uncertain and doubtful. Especially if we consider farther,

III. THAT as invisible beings, superior in power to mankind, may perform real miracles, and fuch as are of the most astonishing and stupendous kind; we are not fure that God may not, for wife reasons, permit this. As the great Creator has fix'd general rules, the wifest and best that could be, for the government of the natural and moral world, tis not likely that he will let any of his creatures alter those rules at pleasure, just as it may fuit their bumour, or malicious purposes, and whenever they have a mind to amuse, astonish, or deceive those who are more ignorant and weak than themselves. But shall we prefume to fay, that he can never allow any thing of this kind, upon any occasion whatever? This we cannot take upon us to affert, without knowing all the possible ends that may be ferved by fuch permissions, which, I think, is much more than we can modestly pretend to.

INDEED, we are certain of this from the moral perfections of the Supreme Being, that he will never fuffer the bonest and impartial to be necessarily deceived, to their detriment and prejudice. But the this is a necessary exception, and may perhaps include in it a E 3 great

great variety of cases; it deserves to be confider'd in general, that the bonest and impartial cannot be thus deceived, if they are not determined by miracles alone to give their affent to any doctrine as a divine revelation. but by the reasonableness, and intrinsic excellence of the doctrine itself in conjunction with miracles. And moreover, that there are some supposeable cases, in which, if the reason of mankind be exercised in the lowest degree that can be expected from moral and accountable creatures, it will be a fure and constant preservative from all dangerous errors. For instance, if a person pretends to bring a revelation from heaven, that directly recommends and encourages intemperance, injustice, and cruelty, and fuch like most notorious, and hurtful immoralities; I cannot fee how any common man, who makes the least use of that understanding which God hath given him, can be imposed upon to embrace a scheme so destructive of the plainest obligations of virtue, and of the peace and happiness of the world, by ten thousand miracles. He has it in his power eafily to detect the falshood of all such doctrines, how pompoufly foever they are supported. For his reason must inform him, unless he is so stupid as to destroy his accountableness, or so indolent and careless as is inconsistent with fincerity, that no miracles can prove that to be true, which calls darkness light, and in-

tirely confounds the necessary and immutable difference of moral good and evil; and he must immediately be convinced, if he will allow himself any time for cool reflection, that fuch miraculous effects ought not to be ascribed to the power of God, whose nature is the most perfect, and invariable reason, and who cannot contradict himself, nor give the least encouragement to vice and impurity. So that if in such plain cases, reasonable creatures who have an easy and infallible rule to go by, and of whom, if any thing can be expected, it may justly be required that they should discover the fraud, will notwithstanding fuffer themselves to be deceiv'd, they alone must answer for the consequences: and it can no more be inconfistent with the absolute perfection of the great Governour of the world to permit this, than 'tis for him to permit any other instance of moral evil.

FROM what has been said it appears, that miracles alone do not prove the truth of any religion; because we cannot pretend to say of any miraculous effects, at least not of most of the miracles which are recorded in the old and new testament, that they are performable by God only; or that the divine being may not, upon some occasions, permit superior invisible beings to work very great and astonishing miracles; provided he has put it in the power of every bonest and impartial inquirer, to avoid being seduced by them into

any errors, that are dangerous to his virtue, and happiness.

In truth, miracles, abstractly consider'd, are only a demonstration of a superior power: but whether they are performed by a wife, just, and benevolent agent; whether they are the immediate effects of his power, who is the best, as well as the greatest of beings; or, which comes to the fame, wrought by beings commission'd by him, can only be known by the beneficial effects of them, and by the nature, tendency, and use of the doctrines which they are defigned to confirm. Let us illustrate this matter a little farther by an instance, by which we shall see, that what has been urged as the reason of the thing, will, upon a proper trial, be the conduct of every thinking and rational man, Would any person, if a pretended revelation was brought him in a book that he was not admitted to look into, or know any thing of the contents of, venture upon it in the dark, and promise absolutely to embrace it, and regulate his conduct by it, even the the pretender was enabled to perform real miracles? Such a behaviour would show the forwardness of his faith, or rather an easy credulity; but fure I am, it could be no proof that his faith was wife and rational. For if the doctrines which this book contains, should prove to be unworthy of God, and repugnant to reason and virtue (which is a very Supposeable

supposeable circumstance, the scripture itself allowing, that false prophets may work miracles for the support of an imposture) a man must be ashamed of having made so basty a conclusion, or abandon all pretensions to understanding and fincerity. If when he comes to examine it, he finds in it fuch positions as these, that God is not to be reverenced, served, and worshipped by his creatures; that men are at liberty to indulge themselves in all the irregularities of their sensual appetites; that they may hate, persecute, and destroy one another for religious differences; if, I say, it contains fuch principles as these, or any one of them, ought he not to reject it with abhorrence, as having much stronger, and more certain evidence, that fuch doctrines are false and abfurd, than he can have that any miracles whatever, confider'd in themselves, are divine? And must not then that faith be enthusiastical, and rise vastly higher than the evidence which is the ground and foundation of it, that receives doctrines absolutely, and without deliberating at all about them, upon the testimony of miracles alone? Is it not directly contrary to the nature of true religion, which encourages the utmost freedom of inquiry into all its principles? Or can any thing give more folid suspicion of fraud and knavish design, than the restraining this liberty, which is the most valuable privilege of our intelligent nature, and indeed, without

without which, our reason is quite infignificant and useless?

But the miracles cannot alter the nature of things, prove falshood to be truth, virtue to be vice, or vice virtue; yet when the doctrines they attest are all agreeable to reason, and upon the whole bonourable to almighty God, and useful and beneficial to mankind; when they give us the justest notions of his infinite perfections, and of the wisdom and goodness of his moral providence, and are fuited to the circumstances and necessities of those to whom the revelation is made; they must be allowed to have the greatest weight, and to be sufficient and substantial proofs that a religion, which in its whole frame and defign appears to be worthy of God, is really derived from him. For 'tis certainly agreeable to our most perfect apprehensions of the Deity, to suppose that such a doctrine as this is his peculiar care; that he should give it the strongest credentials, and impress the stamp of his authority upon it; a doctrine that represents his own nature, and essential attributes, in the most amiable and glorious light, and is of the bigbest advantage to his creatures: and its being fo worthy, that God should interpose in an extraordinary way to recommend and enforce it, is a very just presumption, that the miracles which bear testimony to it, are the effects of his wisdom and power; or at least, if they

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Christian revelation defended. 59 are the operations of other beings, that they are done by authority from him.

THIS argument will appear to be of very great force, if we confider farther, that in any other view of the case, it is not to be accounted for. For 'tis utterly improbable, that evil spirits, if they might be permitted to perform such wonderful works, would exert themselves in the defense of true piety and virtue; and counteract all those meafures, by which alone the kingdom of darkness, and iniquity is, or can be supported. The reasoning of Christ upon this head is unanswerable: Every kingdom divided against itself, is brought to desolation; and every city or bouse divided against itself, shall not stand. And if Satan cast out Satan, be is divided against himself; bow shall then his kingdom stand *? Besides, to suppose that they employ their fuperior skill and power to gain credit to a doctrine, which has a direct tendency to promote the moral rectitude, and fupreme happiness of human nature, is making them act the part of benevolent, friendly, and virtuous beings; nay, it is indeed attributing to them one of the bighest acts of goodness we can conceive of, and consequently quite destroys their character as wicked and malicious spirits. And if it be asked, (which is the only refuge left) whether good spirits may

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^{*} Mat. 12. 25, 26.

not think it a commendable thing, to attempt the introducing a religion into the world that is in general fo useful and beneficial to mankind, by fuch miracles, as will procure it the appearance and credit of a divine revelation? I answer, that 'tis hardly conceivable that they would attest a falshood; or that having so high a reverence of the divine Being, they would, upon any occasion, make use of his authority without his express command: because this is an error in morality discoverable, I think, even by human reason, and confequently what we ought not to suppose such exalted beings to be capable of. Besides, we cannot eafily perfuade ourselves that God would permit this. For if such great miracles as those recorded in the new testament, for instance, may, by divine permission, be wrought by created beings, to confirm the truth of a doctrine that is upon the whole worthy of God, or, in other words, which, for any thing that appears from reason to the contrary, may be of divine original; (as we cannot conceive of any miracles, which if these are all possible, may rationally be judged impossible to a created agency) it will not be in the power of God himself to make a revelation, and by certain credentials, i. e. fuch credentials as may be distinguished from the credentials that other beings may give, demonstate the truth of it to the world. But this is a supposition so absurd, that it cannot be admitted ever to happen in the course

course of his moral government; because if we should grant that an external revelation has in all ages of the world bitherto been need-less, 'tis possible however, that some time hereafter the circumstances of mankind may be such, that it may be of the highest advantage to them; and consequently, that the wisdom and goodness of God may incline him to communicate it.

I EXPECT it will be objected, that if the foregoing account be true, miracles are of no use. For it may be said, they are allowed to be proofs of a divine revelation no farther, than as the doctrine they bear testimony to is worthy of God; and if the doctrine be rational and good, they are altogether superstuous, because it will recommend itself without them, by its own intrinsick excellency, to the unprejudiced reason and judgment of mankind. To this I shall endeavour to give a full and distinct answer. And,

roper to engage the attention of men, even to moral doctrines. 'Tis indeed true, that these being all principles and dictates of reason, may prevail by the force of their own evidence, without any external recommendation; but 'tis as true, that if men will not consider and examine impartially, they will never (so plain, important, and useful as they

they are) make their way in the world, Now this ferious confideration, and deliberate unbiassed inquiry even into the principles of natural religion, may in some circumstances be very unlikely to happen, in opposition to the strong prejudices of education, to cuflom, general opinion, interest, and other motives, which have the most powerful influence upon mankind, without fomething to awaken and alarm the mind. Especially if we add what universal experience testifies, that prejudices of a religious kind, being of all others the most facred and venerable, take the fastest hold of us, and are with the utmost difficulty eradicated. If a man, without any thing uncommon and striking to introduce his attempt of reforming the world, had applied himself either to the Jews or Gentiles, at the time of our Saviour's appearance; to restore natural religion amongst the former to its original purity, when it was very much corrupted and depraved; or to rescue the latter from their superstition and idolatry; he would probably have been looked upon as an impertinent, pragmatical, busy fellow at least, if not punished as a profane, irreligious person, and a disturber of the public peace. But miracles would at least gain him an audience, and not only convince wife men that his pretentions had somewhat extraordinary in them, and were worthy to be examin'd, but perhaps rouse the indolent and vicious. And if they ferved only

only to ballance mens prejudices and excite them to an bonest impartial inquiry, they must certainly be of excellent use; because the mind being thus free and disengaged, and put upon considering, a doctrine that was in itself rational and good, could scarce fail of an bonourable reception; and of being heartily embraced and submitted to. But farther,

2. ALL the parts of a pretended revelation may be worthy of God, and yet the reafonableness and truth of them may not be alike evident in themselves. For besides moral precepts, and plain unquestionable natural principles, it may contain others, that upon the foot of mere reason are uncertain and doubtful, but yet, if firmly establish'd, would be very ftrong motives to virtue; of which kind, I take the doctrine of the eternity of future rewards to be. And befides, there may be in it some doctrines that reason alone could discover nothing of; and certain positive institutions too, as will be hereafter shewn, useful indeed, either in particular circumstances; or in general, as being subservient to the great purposes of morality; but the obligation of which does not arise from the nature of the things themselves, but must be resolved into the will of the supreme governour and lawgiver. And fuch doctrines and precepts as these, against which no objection of any weight can be raised, to shew that

that they are unworthy of God to reveal or enjoin; especially if they belong to a revelation, that, in the whole scheme and design of it, is most excellent, and compleatly adapted to promote true goodness, miracles must prove to be actually of divine original. So that they answer these two great uses, among others perhaps that might be mentioned; viz. to engage the attention to moral doctrines, and the principles of natural religion, which, when confidered, will foon approve themselves to the rational judgment of mens minds; and to give a fanction to others, which tho agreeable to, are not demonstrable by natural reason. They are a good evidence, that what reason informs us may be true, is really true; that a revelation, which for any thing that appears to the contrary, is worthy of God, proceeds directly from him; and make that which to reason is obscure and doubtful, clear and certain.

This is all that I think it necessary to offer, concerning the *use* and evidence of miracles in general: a particular defence of the credibility of the miracles related in the gospel-bistory, will be attempted in the third chapter.

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CHAP. II.

Vindicating the conduct of providence in not making the christian revelation universally known; and proving that this is consistent with the perfections of God, and consequently with the notion of its being a divine revelation.

T will be asked, if a revelation was of fuch great use to mankind, as it is reprefented to be in the preceding chapter; why was it not given fooner? why not communicated to ALL? and why is it not renewed, as often as gross ignorance, and a corruption of natural religion prevails? The author of Christianity &c. puts the question differently thus; " Is it not incumbent on those, who " make any external revelation fo necessary " to the happiness of all mankind, to shew, " how it is confistent with the notion of "God's being universally benevolent, not to " have reveal'd it to all his children, when " all had equal need of it *?" After which he adds feveral other questions that might very well have been spared, because it will be allowed him, that it " was as eafy for " God to have communicated a revelation to * P. 196.

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" all nations, as to any one nation, or person; " or in all languages, as in any one; nay, " that he could have made all men, for the " fake of this noble end, speak in one and " the fame language, and that God cannot " have any need at all of language, to let " mankind know his will *." These things, I fay, needed not to have been mentioned, because they are quite foreign to the present argument: the matter in debate being only this, whether it be confistent with the wifdom and justice of God as the moral governour of mankind, and with his universal benevolence to his creatures and subjects, to bestow upon some the great advantage of a particular revelation, and deny it to others? I shall endeavour to give a full folution of this difficulty, in which the adversaries of revelation feem to triumph as unanswerable. In order to which I observe,

THAT was a revelation absolutely necesfary to enable mankind to know and practise, what it is their duty to know and practise; was it, I say, in the nature of the thing itself absolutely necessary, to enable men, as men, to know, and practise their duty; we might fairly conclude from the justice, as well as the wisdom and goodness of God, that he would afford it to ALL. But this is not the case; the infinitely wise governour of the world requiring nothing of his crea-

tures, but what he has given them a capacity to perform; the natural consequence of which is, that every man does his duty, and answers the end of that particular station in which he is placed, who acts up to the light and advantages he enjoys, whatever they are. And upon any other principle besides this of the absolute necessity of a revelation as above explained, 'tis, I conceive, impossible for us to prove, that God is obliged to give a revelation at all, let mankind be ever so ignorant, and fallen into ever so corrupt and degenerate a state. The utmost we can say is, that it would be agreeable to our notions of his most perfect goodness, and therefore we might perhaps be tempted to hope for it; but as there are infinite things of this kind, which would be of great advantage to particular parts of the creation, and yet are not granted to them, it must be presumption and conjecture only, and could not amount to a probability.

THE great God establish'd at first such a course and order of things with respect to mankind, as was most worthy his infinite wisdom and goodness. He made them rational and free creatures; the necessary result of which is, that they are capable of neglecting and darkening, as well as of exercising and improving that reason, which he implanted in them to be the rule of their actions. Suppose then, that by an abuse of

their natural liberty, they had involved themselves in deplorable ignorance of the plainest principles of morality. Nay, let us suppose not only that the most absurd superstition, and the groffest corruptions of true piety and virtue had been; for many ages, the establish'd religion of a great part of the world; but that the common people, having none to instruct them better, and being strongly prepossessed in favour of the superstition in which they were educated, and taught that it was the greatest impiety to doubt of the facredness and divine authority of any part of it, and never meeting with any thing to put them upon thinking, and rouze them out of their indolence and stupidity, were under the power of almost invincible prejudices; and so ignorant even of moral obligations, that they practifed none of them upon the true principles of virtue, but only as conveniences in outward life, and from a kind of instinct like that in brute creatures, and confequently no more deferving the name of religion than some actions of mere animals. Supposing this, I fay, to be the case, whether it has ever actually happen'd in all the degrees of it or no, tho, I believe, most mens observation will furnish them with some examples very like it; will it follow, because they are funk so low as to be but very little above brutes, so that it may justly be question'd, whether they deserve the character of moral agents, or not, (which may be owing more to the unhappy

happy circumstances in which providence has placed them, than to any wilful fault of their own) that God is obliged by a revelation to rectify these disorders? I think far from it. For the original constitution, notwithstanding these accidental defects, was, upon the whole, wife, and good; and the great author of nature is no more oblig'd to interpose in an extraordinary way, to alter, and amend in fuch cases as these, than in any other instance of natural evil. We see in fact, that there are in the human species many downright ideots, who, very probably, were it not for some accidental defect in the bodily organs, might think and reason as well as other men. And certainly it must be as consistent with the wisdom and goodness of God, to suffer others to live in such circumstances, that they may be almost as ignorant of good and evil, at least as far as rational religion and morality is concern'd, as ideots, or brutes; and he cannot, strictly speaking, be oblig'd to redress the one case any more than the other. Nor is it necessary to suppose, if we allow this, that the faculty of reason which he hath given them, will be quite lost; because they may bereafter be placed in better circumstances, in which their reason shall have a larger scope, without any of those difficulties which now encumber and oppress it. And in the mean while, notwithstanding all the disadvantages they labour under, their happiness,

70 The usefulness and truth of the piness, even in this life, may be much greater than their misery. And,

IF it cannot be proved that God is obliged to give a revelation, even to persons who have in a manner quite loft all the advantage of their rational faculties, or to take any extraordinary measures for their recovery; much less can we affert this, when a revelation is only wanted to enable them to attain the bigbest degrees of that happiness, of which their nature may in itself be capable; and consequently, tho it cannot be denied, that when the world is over-run with ignorance, and superstition, a revelation is extremely defireable, and might be highly useful, this is no argument at all that God is necessarily oblig'd to communicate it, tho it be a reason why be may.

To apply what has been said to the point we are now considering. If God is not obliged to give a revelation at all, provided it be not absolutely necessary to enable men, as men, to know and practise their duty, or what he indispensably requires of them, not-withstanding it would be a great advantage to them; the mere consideration of its usefulness, and of their being in deplorable circumstances for want of it, can be no argument that as a wise, just, and infinitely benevolent Being, he must make it universal: because what does not prove that he is under

an obligation to grant it to ANY, can never prove that he is bound to afford it to ALL. The whole of the controversy therefore is brought within a very narrow compass, and turns upon this fingle question; whether, what God is not obliged to vouchfafe to any, he may not communicate to fome, exclusively of the rest; or, in other words, whether he may not bestow his favours upon whom he pleases, and in cases, in which right, and strict justice are not at all concern'd, make a difference between his creatures very much to the advantage of some above others, confistently with the most perfect wisdom and goodness? Let any man try whether he can make more of it; and whether, if he will not allow that the divine Being may act thus, he must not suppose, that he is oblig'd to treat ALL exactly in the same manner, and to communicate to ALL precisely equal degrees of moral perfection, and equal capacities for happiness.

The late most excellent and learned Dr. Clarke had observed very judiciously, that "as God was not obliged to make all "his creatures equal, or to make men an-"gels, or to endow all men with the same capacities and faculties; so he was not bound to make all men capable of the "same degree, or the same kind of happiness; or to afford all men the very same means F 4 "and

" and opportunities of obtaining it +?" But this the author of Christianity &c. thinks not to be a sufficient solution of the difficulty. And therefore though he owns, that " infinite variety of creatures, and confe-" quently inequality, is necessary to shew " the great extent of the divine goodness, " which plainly appears from the beautiful, " and well-formed system of the world, and " the due fubordination of things, all con-" trived for the happiness of the whole;" he adds, " yet fure, it does not from thence " follow, that God will not either here, or " hereafter, bestow on the rational creation " all the happiness their nature is capable " of; fince that was the end why God gave " it them *." Let us see whether there is any thing in this, which I think is fomewhat obscurely express'd, that will destroy the force of the learned Dr's reasoning. And.

If this writer means no more, by God's bestowing on the rational creation, and particularly on mankind, all the happiness their nature is capable of, than this, that all who are sincere will find favour with God and be rewarded by him in proportion to their improvements, whether they enjoy the advantage of a revelation, or not; or, as he himself expresses it at the lower end of the

[†] Sermons at Boyle's Letture, 7th edit. p. 317. * P. 408.

same page, in the language of scripture, that men are accepted according to what they have, and not according to what they have not: this is true, but I believe it will be judged to be very little to the purpose; because every part of it may be allowed, and yet men may be possessed in this life, the state of their trial, of different capacities, and advantages for obtaining happiness, and consequently be rewarded with proportionably different and unequal degrees of happiness hereafter. And fince the ingenious author himself allows, that God, for the greater display of his goodness, has very wifely created distinct orders of intelligent beings, one above another, and consequently that there is a very great inequality between the several parts of the moral creation: fo that, even in his opinion it is not, in the nature of the thing itfelf, inconfistent with his perfect wisdom, and universal unlimited benevolence, to make at least as great a difference between his creatures, as can be supposed to be between such of mankind as enjoy the light of revelation, and others, who for want of it, are overwhelmed with the groffest ignorance and superstition; this latter case must be intirely agreeable to the wifest exercise of his moral attributes in the government of the world, if there are not some circumstances peculiar to it, that make it otherwise; i. e. unless it be inconfistent with the perfections of God, to make fuch a difference among beings called

by one general name, and partaking of the fame common nature, and not to afford all of them equal advantages for obtaining the highest degrees of that happiness, of which their rational nature is in itself capable. If this be our author's sense, as perhaps it may, and not that already mentioned, I would ask, how is it proved? Nay, how is it possible it should be proved, if the present constitution of things be upon the whole wise and good (which may fairly be taken for granted, in arguing with persons who acknowledge all the principles of natural religion) when 'tis undeniably false in fact?

LET any one of common observation, and knowledge of the world, give himself a little time to confider, and he will find, that men have not only vastly different capacities for discovering the obligations of true religion and morality, in their utmost extent, but that their opportunities, and advantages are very different. Some, not only enjoy greater strength of reason, but are much more likely, if their faculties were but equal, confidering the circumstances in which they are placed, to form right notions about these important points, than others. And if the rectitude of human nature confifts in the practice of virtue; do not fuch enjoy better means, and more favourable opportunities for pursuing their supreme rational perfection and happiness, than those, whose knowledge, and consequently

sequently their practice of natural religion and morality is corrupted and deprav'd by false and dishonourable notions of God, and by a low, and extravagant superstition? And has it not been shewn, that as they are enabled by their fuperior advantages to make greater improvements, more completely to anfwer the end of their rational being, and to do more real good in the world; and as their larger knowledge, and being furnish'd with clearer, and stronger motives, requires from them a more difficult, and extensive service; 'tis most suitable to the divine wisdom and justice to suppose, that they will be rewarded with bigher degrees of happiness: and, that if we suppose the contrary, considering that if they do not improve more, and act better than others, they will be more fe-verely punish'd, their just sentiments of natural religion in all the parts of it, must be a misfortune rather than an advantage, and happy are the blind and ignorant? 'Tis plain from hence, that God did not defign all mankind, tho of the same species of being, for equal degrees of happiness; because they have not the same capacities, nor the same advantages, nor an equal probability of obtaining the bigbest, that their rational nature may be capable of. And why may not the great Governour of the world make the same, or a greater difference (for I apprehend 'tis impossible for us to fix the precise bounds beyond which he cannot proceed!)

why may he not, I say, make the same difference between mankind by a particular revelation, granting it to some, and denying it to others, as is most visibly and constantly made in the common course of his providence?

THE difficulty appears to me to be exactly equal upon the foot of natural religion, as upon the supposition of a revelation. If it be faid, that all who are equally fincere, and whose natural capacities are equal, will be equally bappy upon the whole, whatever the difference of their particular improvements and services may be, this, I think, has been proved to be false upon both suppofitions; and that they will be rewarded in proportion to their improvements, and so far in an equality, may be as true, if there be a revelation, as if men were left intirely to the religion of nature. If it be urged farther, that a revelation vouchsafed only to fome parts of the world implies, that the great creator has not afforded to all his rational creatures of the same rank, equal advantages for obtaining that happiness their reasonable nature is capable of, which is inconsistent with his impartial justice, and universal goodness: I answer, why then has he not done it in the establish'd disposition and order of things? There is evidently a great inequality amongst mankind in this respect, which, upon the scheme of our ad-

adversaries, cannot be occasion'd by a revelation, but arises from the difference of their natural capacities, and the variety of their circumstances. And as this difference of natural capacities is the express will of the great Creator, and intirely owing to him; and this variety of circumstances, and the influence it has upon opinions and practices, refults from the original constitution of things, that was at first settled by his wisdom and power, and consequently was foreseen and defign'd by him; he is as much accountable for the difference that is made between men in a natural way, as for any that is made by an extraordinary interposition: and what will defend the one, must fully and effectually vindicate the other. For we must limit the infinite wisdom of God, much more than is becoming beings of fuch weak and narrow understandings, if we presume to say, that it cannot be proper for him to make that difference between his creatures in an extraordinary way, which he does in the general standing course of nature; and all objections against such a method of proceeding, which are only defigned to ruin the credit of a revelation that is not universal, i. e. in short, to prove that God never gave a revelation to mankind, and are mightily applauded, upon the account of their supposed strength to gain this favourite point; in truth, strike at the perfections and providence of God, and undermine the foundation of natural

tural religion itself. And 'tis to be hoped, that the persons who make use of them will consider this, and urge them with more caution and modesty at least, if they have really such a high veneration of the religion of nature, as they would have the world believe.

I EXPECT it will still be ask'd, whether, in what view foever we confider a revelation. be it either as absolutely necessary, or only as very useful to mankind, the same reasons which could induce the divine Being to give it to ANY, will not hold as strong for vouchsafeing it to ALL? I answer no: And, I think, I have evidently proved the contrary, by shewing that he may, consistently with his perfections, afford a revelation to some nations, and not to others; and that this is conformable to the operations of his providence in other cases. It may as well be ask'd, whether, if there was any reason for his forming beings of fuperior intelligence and perfection in the moral world, that reafon must not be equally good, for his making ALL his rational creatures of the highest order? The questions are exactly parallel, and the very same answer will serve for both. In each case it may be urged with equal strength, that the thing contended for is the communication of a greater good, and consequently most worthy his perfect goodness; that ALL are his creatures, and upon that account 'tis most worthy his universal and im-

impartial goodness. Or, if it should be said in behalf of the one, that " variety of " creatures, and consequently inequality, is " necessary to shew the great extent of the " divine goodness, which plainly appears " from the beautiful and well-form'd fv. " stem of the world, and the due subordi-" nation of things, all contrived for the " happiness of the whole;" I see no reason why we may not fay the same in vindication of the other: fince the wisdom, and greater goodness of God may, for any thing we can prove to the contrary, be as much display'd in a variety, and consequently inequality, among beings of the same species (all whose natural capacities do not in fact appear to be the same, tho they go by one name, and are of the same compound frame) as in a variety of creatures of different orders. And if God is not obliged absolutely, and in general, to afford all his creatures equal capacities and advantages for happiness, he cannot be bound to it, merely because they belong to one particular species. For can that alone give them a claim to any thing, which they have no ground to expect as the reasonable creatures of God, and from his effential wisdom and goodness?

But, if any should inquire farther, what the particular reasons were, which inclined the divine being to grant a revelation to some parts of the world, exclusive of others?

I chuse rather to confess my ignorance of what I do not understand, than to pretend to be able to affign them. Thus much however may be faid in general, that 'tis very probable they are of the same kind with those that determin'd him to appoint such a variety, as it is confess'd there is in the rational creation. I may add, that tho it be allowed, that the All-perfect Being does not make his mere will the rule of his actions, but the fitness and propriety of things; and confequently that he never acts arbitrarily, or without a reason; it does by no means follow, that his creatures must necessarily see the reasons of his conduct in every instance; or that they have a right to censure, whatever they cannot distinctly account for. Far from it. For the way that we come to know that God is not an arbitrary being, is not by feeing that there is a reason in all his actions, which is vastly more than the wisest of mortals can pretend to, who are ignorant of the design and uses of innumerable things, in the constitution of nature, and the course of providence: but we conclude from those surprizing marks of wisdom and goodness which we can distinctly perceive in the works of God, and because the more thoroughly we understand them, we have the more clear, strong, and undeniable demonstration of it, that the great Author and Governour of the universe is possessed of these perfections, in the most absolute and com-

complete manner; and consequently that all things are framed and ordered with the fame wife and benevolent view, tho in particulars it does not appear equally, and in some not at all, to our limited understandings. These therefore ought never to be confounded as identical propositions, viz. that the divine being acts without a reason; and that we can see no reason in a particular constitution, or method of acting: because the latter does not in the least infer the former; but on the contrary, 'tis rational to suppose, from the general evidences of his supreme and most perfect wisdom, that for every part of his conduct there is a good and fufficient reason, tho we may not be able to discover precisely what it is. And whether this may not be as fairly urged, to vindicate the conduct of providence in not making the Christian religion universally known, as it is by the defenders of natural religion against atheists, to answer many very important difficulties in the common course of it, which cannot be particularly accounted for; I fubmit to the judgment of every confiderate and ingenuous reader.

THE learned Dr. Clarke had intimated, upon principles, in the main, agreeable to those I have advanced, that a revelation could not "be claim'd and demanded as of "justice, for then it must have been given in "all ages, and to all nations;" but "rather G "wish'd

" wish'd for and defired as of mercy and " condescending goodness +." Upon which our author asks, "Can a being be deno-" minated merciful, and good, who is so " only to a few; but cruel, and unmer-" ciful to the rest *?" Certainly no: but it has been shewn, that the not bestowing equal capacities, and advantages upon all; the not affording all mankind the same opportunities for obtaining the highest happiness, which their rational nature, if it had all proper belps, and helps that some enjoy, might be capable of, is not cruel, and unmerciful; and moreover, that it is the true state of the world, and consequently must be defended upon the foot of natural religion only, And I may add, that it is confistent with impartiality, so far as that is a real excellency, and a proper part of the divine character, as well as with absolute, and universal goodness. For the impartiality of God does not confift in treating all his creatures, even of the same species, alike; it does not cramp him in the free distribution of his favours, in dispensing which, he may act with what variety, and make what difference he pleases; but regards chiefly, if not altogether, the execution of justice; and the most that it supposes is, that God is equally defirous that all men should obtain that happiness, which is suitable to their

[†] Sermons at Boyle's Letture, 7th edit. p. 315.

particular stations, capacities, and circumstances; and that in quality of their governour, and judge, he has given them sufficient means to know and practife all that he requires from them, and will equally favour and reward the equally fincere, whatever be the difference of their advantages, in proportion to their improvements, and fervices. And what is there in his favouring some nations with the light of revelation, while he leaves others destitute of it, that is in the least inconsistent with this? May not all this, which is the only just and rational sense in which we can conceive of God as a being necessarily impartial, be allow'd; nay, is it not actually allow'd by the best advocates for revelation?

WHEN therefore the ingenious author goes on for several pages, in a popular declamatory way, to represent these as their principles, and particularly as the principles of the learned Dr. Clarke, because he had affirmed in the passage above-cited, that, " as God was not obliged to make all his " creatures equal, or to make men angels, " or to endow all men with the same capa-" cities and faculties; fo he was not bound " to make all men capable of the same de-" gree, or the same kind of happiness; or " to afford all men the very same means and " opportunities of obtaining it;" to represent these, I say, because he had afferted this, as his principles, that " God made some peo-" ple

" ple his favourites, without any confidera-" tion of their merits; and merely because " they believe certain opinions taught in that " country, where they happen to be born; " while others, far the greater number, " shall, from age to age, want this favour; " not upon the account of their demerits, " but because destin'd to live in places, where " God, who always acts from motives of in-" finite wisdom and goodness, thought it best " to conceal from them all fuch opinions ";" and that, " all who are equally fincere, are " not equally acceptable to God +;" and upon this intirely false account of them, describes his principles as " inconfistent with " the character of God as a being of unli-" mited benevolence, and with his being no " respecter of persons ;" and the like; such a conduct may justly be complain'd of as unfair, and difingenuous. And I make no doubt, but that though fuch little arts in controversy, as the framing senses for our antagonists which we can easily barangue against and expose; senses, which, their words even by torturing cannot be made to speak, may be a means of imposing upon the vulgar, and upon superficial-thinkers who never examine any thing thoroughly, and confequently, whatever their outward circumstances may be, are in point of reason, and found judgment, very little, if any thing,

^{*} P. 409. † P. 413. ‡ P. 409, 410, &c.

above the rank of the vulgar; wise men, and impartial inquirers after truth, will esteem them to be, what they really are, the weak supports of a feeble, and tottering cause, and do the writers the justice they deserve.

Our author observes farther upon this head, that " when God acts as governour of " the universe, his laws are alike defign'd " for all under his government; that is, all " mankind: and confequently, what equally " concerns all, must be equally knowable "by all *." If he means, that God cannot, as the governour of the universe, afford some men clearer notices of their duty than others, or reveal his will to some parts of the world, and deny that favour to the rest; I need fay nothing to it, having already shewn the contrary. God, as the governour of the world, makes a vast difference between his creatures; and even the laws of morality are not equally knowable by all, great numbers labouring under fuch difficulties, that their ignorance, even of important branches of natural religion, seems to be almost invincible. From whence 'tis plain, that what might be equally useful to ALL, is not granted to ALL; or, in other words, all have not in one sense sufficient means (such means as are likely to be effectual) to discover it. But if he means, that all are capable of knowing the laws of God, so far as the

knowledge of them is necessary to render them acceptable to him, this is granted; but what doth it prove? Why only, that the knowledge of any particular revelation is not necessary to those, to whom that revelation is not given. He adds, " And if " the universality of a law, be the only cer-" tain mark of its coming from the gover-" nour of mankind; how can we be certain, " that, which wants this mark, comes from " him +?" i. e. if we apply it to the present argument, if nothing can be a divine revelation, but what is made known universally, we cannot be fure that any thing which is not made known universally, is a divine revelation; or thus, if a revelation must be universal, it must be universal: a most certain, and selfevident truth! If this author will be so good, instead of afferting, to prove the premises, the consequence, we allow, will make itself.

VERY much to the same purpose is the following piece of reasoning, equally particular, and remarkable: "If God was always willing, that ALL men should come to the knowledge of the true religion, and the Christian religion be the only true and absolutely perfect religion;—it follows, that the Christian religion has existed from the beginning; and that God, both then, and ever since, has continued to give all mankind sufficient means to P. 197.

" know

" know it; and that 'tis their duty to know, " believe, profess, and practise it *." Here the ingenious author afferts, that if God was always willing, that all men should come to the knowledge of the true religion, he must always have given them such sufficient means to know it, as made it their duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it: so that nothing, but what it has been the duty of ALL mankind, in all ages, to know, believe, profess, and practise, can, in his opinion, be that true religion, which God was willing that all should come to the knowledge of. I would ask then, has it been the duty of ALL mankind, at all times, and in every part of the world, to know all the branches of natural religion? If it has, and he means by their duty, what is the most obvious, and only intelligible sense of the word, that God justly requires it of them as necessary to procure his acceptance, the consequence will be, that all idolaters, all the superstitious, and all who ever entertain'd unworthy and dishonourable thoughts of God, are absolutely debarred the divine favour; which, if it be the charity of his religion of nature, is with me an insuperable prejudice against it, and makes me fet the higher value upon Christianity, as allowing its professors to entertain more generous and pleasing sentiments concerning the state of their fellow-creatures. And if it has not been the duty of mankind, in all ages,

and in every part of the world, to know all the branches of natural religion, his meaning can be no more than this, that God has given them fufficient means to know all he requires they should know: but as this is nothing fix'd and determinate, nothing that is particular can be inferr'd from it. This, as far as I can collect from other parts of his book, is really our author's sense; and I chuse the rather to think it so, because it is the most candid interpretation that can be put upon his words.

LET us consider now, what can be made of his reasoning upon this foot: " If God " was always willing, that ALL men should " come to the knowledge of the true reli-" gion;" i. e. should know all that he requires of them as necessary to secure his favour, which is no one intire fet of principles, but may be very various according to their different capacities, circumstances, and prejudices; and "the Christian" (which, supposing it to be nothing else but natural religion revived, is a uniform certain thing, and a great deal more than God indispensably requires all to know) " be the only true re" ligion; it follows, that the Christian re-" ligion has existed from the beginning;" or perhaps, that in all the parts of it, it bardly ever existed at all; " and that God, " both then, and ever fince, has, and bas " not continued to give all mankind sufficient " means

"means to know it; and that 'tis, and 'tis
"not their duty to know, believe, profess,
"and practise it." Upon our author's principles, as I apprehend them, sincerity is the only thing that is absolutely insisted on to render men acceptable to God, which does not necessarily imply in it the knowledge or practise of all the duties of natural religion itself; nor consequently, that God has given all mankind such sufficient means to discover this true religion, as makes it their indispensable duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it; but quite the contrary.

ALLOWING however, that God was always willing, that ALL men should come to the knowledge of the true religion, i.e. of some certain, and determinate system of principles, and duties, the consequence he would draw from it, is not in the least just, or natural, nor hardly intelligible. For natural religion was that true religion, which God from the beginning defigned for all mankind, and which we will grant for the present, it was their duty (having fufficient means in order to that end, i. e. fuch means which, if they were fincere, must be effectual) to know, believe, profess, and practise; and if it had been known, and practifed as it ought, it would have been fufficient for their happiness, and a revelation would perhaps have been needless. But does it follow from hence, that when this excellent religion was corrupted,

rupted, a revelation might not be of great use; or, that if God gave a revelation, it must be just the religion of nature restor'd; and that not one positive precept could be added to it, tho with a view to be subservient to, and aid and strengthen moral obligations? At this rate of inferring, we need not mind what our premises are, but may jump at once to a conclusion. I shall say no more to this point now, because I shall have occasion to consider it more largely, when I come to discourse of positive duties.

CHAP. III.

Shewing, that we have a sufficient probability, even at this distance, of the authenticness, credibility, and purity of the books of the New Testament; and that the common people are able to judge of the truth, and uncorruptedness of a traditional religion; with an answer to the arguments drawn from the change of languages, the different use of scripture, &c. to prove it to be an obscure, perplex'd, and uncertain rule.

AVING proved thus largely, that notwithstanding the sufficiency of reason, if rightly exercised, to discover all the necessary principles and duties of natural religion, an external revelation may be highly useful, when the light of nature is darkned, and ignorance, idolatry, and superstition has overspread the world, which was undoubtedly the case, when our blessed Saviour appeared to publish his religion; and having fully considered all our author's reasonings

upon this head; vindicated the conduct of providence in not making the Christian revelation universal; and shewn what is the proper evidence of the truth and divinity of any particular revelation, and how those to whom it was given, might be satisfied that it really came from God: I proceed to consider objections of another kind, relating to the proof of it in aster-times, the method of its conveyance, and its authority and usefulness as a standing rule. And,

In general, it must be own'd, that the evidence, whatever it be, cannot be fo ftrong at a considerable distance of time, as it was to those to whom the revelation was first made known, and who saw with their own eyes the miracles that were perform'd in confirmation of it; the evidence of fense being undoubtedly stronger, in the nature of the thing itself, than the most unexceptionable However, if it can be shewn, that tradition. we have now all the probability that the thing is capable of, and fuch a probability, as always determines the affent of rational men in other cases, and upon which it would be thought very unreasonable not to act in the common concerns of life; every one that reflects, must think it his interest to embrace the Christian doctrine, and not only acts weakly, but runs a great hazard, if he refuses to be determin'd by probability, merely because 'tis possible the thing may be otherwife.

wise, and will not submit to sufficient evidence, because he has not greater than in cases of this nature can be justly expected. A man may as well resolve to believe nothing upon testimony, nor even the reports of sense, because 'tis possible these may deceive him, and insist upon strict demonstration for every thing.

But the author of Christianity, &c. has thrown together feveral things, to weaken the probability of the truth of revelation to us at this distance, and to persuade the world that no great stress can be laid upon it; and besides, that it is, upon many accounts, a very obscure and uncertain rule. These I now proceed to examine distinctly, tho indeed almost all this part might be trusted to stand without any remarks, if none but perfons of thought and judgment were to read it; it being made up (as will appear in the sequel) of general affertions, possibilities, precarious suppositions, some of which the author himself seems to suspect; and which, as they cannot conclude against any thing, more than they may conclude against every thing that is a matter of probability only, 'tis hard that an ingenuous writer should give us the trouble to confute.

[&]quot;If (fays he) it be but probable, that "God made any external revelation at all, "it can be but probable, tho perhaps not

" in the same degree of probability, that he " made this or that revelation *." This is very darkly express'd, because a probability that God has actually made a revelation, can be nothing else but the probability of some particular revelation; as this therefore is fo very inaccurate and confused, I cannot apprehend it to be the ingenious author's sense. And it is with me much more than a perhaps, that if it was not antecedently probable, which I suppose he means, that God would make an external revelation (as I have already shewn it was not, and could not be, this being a matter of pure favour in which the divine being is absolutely free) there might be a great probability, that he had actually made a revelation. For if a doctrine appear'd in all the parts of it to be worthy of God, and was establish'd by unquestionable miracles, no man could doubt its being divine, whether he had any probable expectation of such an extraordinary interpolition of providence, or not; unless it can be shewn, that God is oblig'd to do every thing for his creatures that will be of great use to them in an extraordinary way, if by accident, they miss of it in the natural and ordinary; or that he can bestow no favour upon them out of the common course of things, but what they have a particular reason to expect. Whereas in truth, its being out of the common and general course is an argument, that

however they might wish, and hope, and presume, they could have no probability that it would happen, if the original constitution and frame of things, notwithstanding the accidental irregularities to which it is subject, was, upon the whole, wise and good; which all must allow, who proceed upon the principles of natural religion, and consequently may be taken for granted in the present argument.

But the reason why the probability is so low, that God hath made this, or that, i. e. in other words, any particular revelation, is, that " this evidence all pretend to, fince, " perhaps, there never was a time or place, " where some external revelation was not " believ'd, and its votaries equally confident, " that theirs was a true revelation; which " shews how easily mankind may in this " point be impos'd on +." Let there have been ever so many pretences to a revelation, and let the feveral pretenders be ever fo positive and confident, may there not be a rule by which it can be judged, whether any particular revelation be from God or no? If it be worthy of God, perfective of the rectitude and happiness of human nature, and confirm'd by numerous and undeniable miracles; will not this prove it to be of divine authority? And are not men, if they will examine, capable of feeing this proof?

Llosbain

The ingenious author feems to argue as if the truth of a revelation was to be decided by its being received and acknowledged as fuch, and the confident pretensions of those that embrace it; and upon this foot indeed, all must be received, or none; and any particular one cannot be more probable than the rest. But let him not make arguments for others, and then confute them. If there may be, in the nature of things (which is all that is contended for) a probability of the truth of any particular revelation, it may appear as strongly to all who consider it, let there be ever so many false claims, as if that particular revelation stood fingle in its pretenfions.

"monstration of the revelation itself, so nei"ther can there be any of its conveyance to
"posterity *." If he means strict demonstration, 'tis granted; if only probability, which
one would judge he intends by the course of
his reasoning, it has been already proved,
that there may be probable evidence of the
truth of a revelation; and I shall now inquire, whether there may not be the same
of its conveyance? And as what this author
has advanc'd upon this head is not in any
regular order, but scatter'd up and down in
several parts of his book, I shall endeavour,
for the greater clearness, to reduce it to some

^{*} P. 185.

method; beginning with what he afferts concerning probability in general, that " the " very nature of it is fuch, that were it only " left to time, even that would wear it quite " out; at least if it be true, what Mathema-" ticians pretend to demonstrate, viz. that " the probability of facts depending on hu-" man testimony, must gradually lessen in " proportion to the distance of time when " they were done *." I need not, I think, concern myfelf with this mathematical calculation, and the rather, because the ingenious author himself does not seem to be in earnest when he mentions it, and introduces it as if he had but little dependance upon it; At least if it be true, &c. I would only ask therefore, whether 1700 years will, in his opinion, quite wear out this probability; or lessen it to such a degree, as that facts related in histories at that distance, are not to be depended on? And whether he will readily admit, that this rule shall be applied indifferently to ALL antient histories? Whether, for instance, he has the least doubt about the authenticness of Cæsar's Commentaries, which were wrote before any of the books of the new testament? Nay, whether he doubts of the truth of some histories of greater antiquity? The putting these questions, would, I am persuaded, be thought impertinent and ridiculous, were we not forc'd to it by some modern writers, who make it their business

* P. 185.

to collect together all they can meet with, in order to furnish out a plausible story against revelation.

THE dispute is not, whether the probability was not greater to those who were either contemporaries, or lived within a few years after such antient histories were wrote; but only, whether allowing that it was, we may not have such a degree of probability as is sufficient to determine our assent, a probability that may be depended on, that removes all doubt, and upon which, even a wife man, would venture confiderably? If fo, this is fufficient to justify our belief of Christianity, and acting accordingly. And for the truth of this, I appeal even to the advocates for natural religion in opposition to revelation, who, I make no doubt, will readily allow it, with respect to any other books besides those of the New Testament; and every man will find, if he consults what passes in his own mind, that he is not dispos'd to doubt of the authenticness of any books of equal antiquity with these, if they are supported by an universal and uncontested tradition.

INDEED there is a great difference between oral tradition, and written. Things which depend intirely on the former, may be more eafily corrupted, or lost; facts may lose some of their most material circumstances, or be greatly exaggerated; and 'tis hardly possible,

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possible, that doctrines should be exactly remember'd, and transmitted down as they were taught at first; or men may think it of no importance to stick to the original words, if they preserve their general sense, which being to every man just as he apprehends it, false comments may easily pass for the doctrines themselves; or else they may alter insensibly. But when they are committed to writing, if we can prove, that the books which contain an account of them are authentic, and the historians persons of sufficient capacity for the work they undertook, and of integrity; and that fuch writings are not corrupted fo as to obscure and pervert the general fense and design of the authors, or necessarily to lead us into mistakes in important points; if we can prove this, I fay, we may, at this distance, have the immediate and direct testimony, not only of persons who were able to inform themselves fully of the facts which they relate, but even of eyewitnesses; and consequently a sufficient probability of the truth of these facts. And unless we allow this, we destroy the credit and use of all the valuable remains of antient bistory. But 'tis scarce possible to be serious upon this argument with men, who cannot themselves heartily believe there is any thing in it. Had the same things been said to invalidate the authority of Tacitus or Livy, these very persons would have made it the subject of their mirth and ridicule. And they H 2 may

may depend upon it, (and I am persuaded are too wise to make the experiment) that if they will but be bonest, and true to their principle, and apply it in the same manner to common books of establish'd reputation, which it is not mens interest to dispute, as they do to the gospel history, they themselves will meet with the same just treatment. In the mean time, it is to be hoped, that the impartial world, from a regard to truth and justice in general, will not fail to shew their dislike of such absurd reasonings when made use of against revelation, which in any other case they would freely and unanimously condemn.

AND now, the mere antiquity of the books of the New Testament being no argument against the probability of the facts related in them, even to us at this distance of time; nothing remains but to shew, that they are authentic and genuine, and contain a credible bistory. And I presume, that if the fame evidence be produc'd, as passes for the authenticness and credibility of other books of as old a date, it will be allow'd to be fufficient; fince 'tis a probability that all readily acquiesce in, where religion and party-interest are out of the question, and that determines the conduct of the wifest, when a higher cannot be had, in the most important scenes of life.

THE author of Christianity &c. seems to have a strong suspicion of forgery, and frequently infinuates it, because we have these books " thro' the hands of men, who not " only in the dark ages of the church, but " even in the beginning, if we may judge " by the number of corrupted passages, and " even forg'd books, were capable of any " pious fraud *." Whether the number of corrupted passages be so great as is here intimated, will be confider'd hereafter; at present, 'tis only to my purpose to observe, that there is no direct evidence pretended, that the books of the New Testament were forg'd, but only because something of this kind was done, a possibility that it may be so. But what will this prove? Is it so much as the shew of a just conclusion, that because some endeavour'd to impose feign'd books upon the world under the name of Matthew, or Paul, there are none extant which were really wrote by them, or that particular books, which were never questioned in any age, are forg'd? Wise men are not much influenc'd by mere possibilities, because the consequence would be, that they must doubt of almost every thing. And all the effect it can have upon such, in the present case, is, to put them upon using a prudent caution that they be not impos'd on; and then, they may have as rational fatisfaction that particular

* P. 185.

books are authentic and genuine, as they could, if no fuch forgeries had ever been committed.

FOR either there can be no proof that any books are genuine, because some have been forg'd, which will not be faid; or else, there must be a special reason why, if some books are forg'd under the name of a particular author, no books under that name can be genuine. But how can this affect the credit of a writing under the name of Paul, any more than of one under Cafar's name, if the positive evidence of the authenticness of both be equal? If it be faid, that the evidence cannot be equal, because there have been forg'd books under Paul's name, but not under Cæsar's; and this begets a suspicion concerning the one, which is not natural concerning the other. I answer, that the ground of this fuspicion, tho there be an actual forgery prov'd and detected, is but a bare poffibility that there may be other forgeries, against all bistorical evidence; and this is possible with respect to Cafar's writings, as well as St. Paul's.

But in truth, the detection of some forg'd writings under the names of the Apostles, rather confirms, than in the least weakens the authenticness of such as were never question'd, and against which, we cannot find, that any thing of moment was ever objected. For cheats

cheats discover'd had a natural tendency to make men more cautious and wary; and the importance of the thing itself, as it relates to religion, which, in the opinion of all the thinking honest part of mankind, is the most facred concern in the world, would make them more upon their guard. And 'tis plain, by the instances of their diligence and fuccess in detecting some frauds, that as they thought it a thing of great moment not to be impos'd on with respect to the genuine records of Christianity; they wanted neither capacity, nor inclination, to distinguish between those books which were authentic, and those which were not; and to expose counterfeits. Feign'd writings might easily be discover'd by sincere and inquisitive perfons, at the time when they were first palm'd upon the world; and if any were so wicked, as to endeavour to make fuch writings pass for the genuine works of Apostolic and inspir'd men, 'tis hardly possible they could be univerfally receiv'd, unless we suppose, that all the professors of Christianity were an ignorant, tricking, faitbless generation, without either sense, or integrity; which is in itself so mean and ungenerous a reflection, if it did not contradict the best accounts of history, that every adversary of revelation who pretends to the character of a gentleman, should be asham'd of it.

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Besides,

BESIDES, forgeries were the more likely to be detected, because in the earliest ages there were different sects of Christians, who were spies upon one another. And I may add, that 'tis extremely difficult to fix any time when fuch impostures could be safely attempted. For if books had been forged under the names of the Apostles in their lifetime, they themselves would soon have put a stop to the cheat. If immediately after their decease, it must have been an easy matter to know, whether fuch books were authentic, or not. For persons very seldom leave any thing of this kind behind them, without communicating, and giving directions about it, to some or other of their intimate friends. Nay, when writings were of great importance, and defigned for the general use of the Christian world, 'tis very probable, that the authors of them would have declared their intentions publickly, that so all might be apprized of it; and that they would have been free and open to every Christian's perusal, both for the advantage they might receive from them, and to prevent all suspicion of imposture. The hand-writing might be compar'd with other undoubted originals; and the stile, sentiment, and spirit of the performance would go a great way towards fixing its real author. Or if he employ'd an Amanuensis, 'tis not to be supposed (it being contrary to what is practifed by all mankind in

in matters of consequence) but that sufficient care was taken, to convince the world that it was wrote by his direction: and no wife man would receive it without fome proper credentials of this kind. That St. Paul, in particular, took this method, that fo the authority of his epiftles might not be disputed, is evident from these words in his 2d epistle to the Thessalonians: The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is the token in every epistle; so I write *. And with respect to the epistles that go under his name, it may be observed moreover, that 'tis absolutely improbable they were forg'd in the time we are now speaking of; because all of them, except those to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, were directed to very noted churches in large and populous cities, and consequently must have been heard of, and known before his death; or else an appeal might have been made to those churches with the greatest ease, and their declaring that they never receiv'd fuch epiftles, which 'tis natural to think they would do voluntarily, whether they were appeal'd to or no, must immediately have detected the forgery. And if we remove the fraud to a farther distance, it will not at all suit with the evidence we have of the greater antiquity of the books of the New Testament, from writings that were extant before any fuch supposeable period, in which they are exprestly cited.

These things I offer not as conclusive proofs, but only as strong presumptions, which, taken altogether, render it far more probable than the contrary can be shewn to be, that the books of the New Testament are genuine.

But the probability rifes a great deal higher, when we confider, that with respect to the far greater part, viz. the four gospels, the acts of the apostles, thirteen epistles of Paul, the first epistle of Peter, and the first of John, we have all the positive evidence that the nature of the case will bear. For to prove that they are justly attributed to the persons under whose names we receive them, there is the universal consent of antiquity. They were, several of them, quoted as theirs by contemporaries, in the very age in which they were wrote, and all in the immediately succeeding ages, and have, as far as appears, been constantly acknowledg'd in that character, both by friends and enemies. And I would ask now, fince no man can pretend to affign any one internal mark of forgery, what better evidence we have, nay indeed what higher evidence there can be, in the nature of the thing, that Cicero, Julius Cæsar, or any other Heathen writers, were the authors of those books which go under their names, than fuch an universal, and undisputed tradition.

But supposing those books of the New Testament to be authentic and genuine, what proof have we that they are a credible bistory? The greatest that can reasonably be desired. For,

1. THERE is a very strong probability, that the persons who related the extraordinary facts contained in them, were not themselves imposed on. For of the four evangelists who have recorded the life, doctrine, and miracles of Christ, two, viz. Matthew, and John, constantly attended him; and of the other two, Luke, and Mark, this at least is true, that they receiv'd their accounts from eye-witnesses. And can any historian record any thing upon better affurance of its truth, than the evidence of his own senses? It may be faid, that this evidence ought indeed to be admitted with respect to all common events, but we must be cautious that we do not trust the senses of others too far in cases that are supernatural; because fanciful and enthusiastic men have, in all ages, been very credulous this way, and equally positive and confident: or else, it could be no great difficulty for a skilful person, to impose upon fuch illiterate rude people as the Apostles, who were altogether unacquainted with the powers of nature, and pass off some secret, and to them unufual operations of natural causes, for real miracles.

To

To which it may be replied in general, that there is not the least reason besides their belief of the miracles related in their history, (and to give this as a reason, is taking the very thing in dispute for granted) to charge any of these writers with credulity and entbufiasm; and that they are very much injur'd when they are represented as persons grofly ignorant; which has been carried too far, even by some who have wrote excellent defences of Christianity, in order to render the propagation of the gospel, by such instruments, the more furprizing and marvellous. For let any man read Paul's defences of himfelf recorded in the AEts of the Apostles, and his epiftles, and he will find fuch a knowledge of mankind, fuch an artful, genteel and happy address, as argue the author to have studied human nature carefully, and made the wifest observations upon it, together with such acuteness and strength of reasoning, as few writers can pretend to. Nay, let him read the epistle of James, one of the illiterate apostles, (of the authenticness of which I can see no just ground to doubt, for reasons which will be mentioned when I come to fpeak of the controverted books) and even there he will meet with fuch judicious moral reflections, fuch a propriety, beauty, and elevation of thought, as are very much above the capacity of the fishermen, and mechanics of this age, and the farthest

Christian revelation defended. 109 farthest that can be from the strain of an enthusiast.

AGAIN, several of our Saviour's miracles were of such a nature, as cannot be supposed to have been merely imaginary, and in which the most enthusiastical could not well be deceiv'd, such as curing inveterate distempers by a word, raising the dead, &c. and are evidently above all the known powers and laws of nature.

But let us consider the case more particularly with respect to the resurrection of Christ, which, together with its consequences, is the chief strength of the Christian cause; and if it be once prov'd, confirms the reality of all the miracles faid to be perform'd by him in bis life-time, and confequently all the preceding parts of the gospelhistory. Now 'tis plain, that the Apostles at their master's death thought all their hopes were loft, and did not expect his refurrection; and when they receiv'd the first report of it, were not forward to believe it : nay, one of them, viz. Thomas, (as is attested by an eye-witness*) was so scrupulous, as to infift upon the nicest scrutiny, and the strictest proof that the most prudent and cautious of our modern unbelievers could be tempted to defire; for he would not believe, till by

^{*} John 20. 25.

handling the wounds made in our Lord's crucified body, he was convinc'd that there was a real refurrection, and that his fenses were not impos'd upon by an airy phantom: fo that 'tis utterly improbable, they were deceiv'd by a too hasty credulity. And besides, they had such a perfect remembrance of their master's person, with whom they had conversed intimately for several years, that they could not take another for him; or if this was possible, had he only made them one, and that a short and transfent visit, it could not be the case, as the circumstances of the fact are related; for he not only submitted to be felt and examin'd, but to give them the greatest security imaginable against a fraud, appear'd to them often, and tarried a confiderable time, eat, and drank, and convers'd freely with them for the space of forty days; and if all this might be transacted in a kind of dream, and be nothing but the reveries of a distemper'd imagination, 'twill be impossible for any man to prove that he is ever thoroughly awake. And fince the charge of credulity and enthuhahm fails, will the most confident opposers of revelation take upon them to fay, that this refurrection was not a true and proper miracle?

LET me add farther, that with respect to the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, we have the accounts from Luke in the acts of the apostles, and Paul in his epistles, who were

were both not only eye-witnesses, but the very persons posses d of these extraordinary powers. And the nature of the thing itself (as to some of these powers at least) happens to be such, as will not admit of a deception. For the weakest enthusiast may know (for instance) as certainly, and without a possibility of being imposed on, whether he is enabled, all of a sudden, to speak languages he never learned intelligibly, and easily; he may, I say, as certainly know this, as the wisest and soberest reasoner, and the greatest philosopher that ever lived.

ALL this, it may be faid, only proves, that these writers were not themselves impos'd on, in the accounts they have given us of the miracles by which Christianity was confirm'd; but what probability have we that they have made a just relation of our Saviour's discourses, and consequently of the substance of the Christian Doctrine? Why in this, they testified only of what they heard, as in the other case, of what they saw. To these discourses 'tis very likely they gave the utmost attention, and heard them for the main frequently repeated; by which means they would make the deeper impression upon their minds, and be more eafily remember'd. And if the history of the miracles be true, there is no difficulty at all in supposing, that where their memories fail'd, they were extraordinarily affifted in recollecting the fermons and

and parables of Christ, so far as was necessary to give a complete view of his religion, and enable them to teach and publish the same doctrine after his decease. Let us therefore, having briefly consider'd the capacity of the gospel-historians to be perfectly inform'd of all the facts which they relate, proceed to examine

2. W HA T may be faid for their integrity, or in other words what probability there is, that as they were not deceiv'd themselves, they would not impose on others; by which we shall establish, beyond all just exception, the truth of their history. And if we look into the history itself, we find an air of bonesty and impartiality running thro' the whole of it. The great defign of it, in all its parts, is to recommend the strictest truth and fidelity, and in general, the noblest perfection of virtue and true goodness. The writers punctually relate, not only fuch things as redounded to their master's bonour, but several other circumstances, which in the opinion of the world, and according to vulgar prejudices, had a quite different aspect, such as the obscurity and meanness of his birth and parentage, his low despicable condition in life, and the like; and are very particular in recounting their own failings with all their aggravations, their ignorance and dullness of apprehension, their cowardice in deferting their master, and Peter's absolute denial of

of him with horrid oaths and imprecations. This is very much like the artless simplicity of upright and disinterested men. But as 'tis possible it might be put on, to procure themselves the reputation of well-meaning and credible historians, I shall lay no more stress upon it than it deserves; and consider it not as direct proof, but as a circumstance that looks well, and in conjunction with others, must have its weight. Let us inquire therefore what was their general character. And,

IT appears from all accounts, that they were persons of strict and exemplary virtue, against the integrity of whose conduct upon the whole, nothing of moment was ever urg'd by the most malicious enemies of Christianity, which certainly gives great strength to their testimony. And the force of this argument is very much increas'd by observing, that they could have no worldly interest to promote by publishing such false accounts: they had no prospect of honour to allure rheit ambition, nor of riches to gratify their covetousness, nor of ease and pleasure to suit a taste for indolence and luxury; but on the contrary, were oblig'd to practife bumility, mortification, and felf-denial, and the appearance of every virtue, which could not but be a very uneasy restraint to men of corrupt and vicious minds; and as their doctrine overturn'd the forms of religion that were esta-

blish'd in all nations, and contradicted the general prejudices and vices of the world, they were sure of reproaches and sufferings; (not only as the probable consequences of their persisting to declare the christian doctrine, but consequences of which their master had expressly forewarn'd them) all which they unanimously, courageously, and chearfully endur'd, and gave the bighest proof of an instexible honesty, by dying to vindicate the truth of their testimony.

I Do not suppose, that mens suffering, or even dying in defence of any particular religion, is in itself an argument of the truth of it; but 'tis the strongest probability in the world that they believe it to be true. For to suppose several persons to have enter'd into a confederacy to lose their all, and expose themselves to contempt, loss of liberty, torments and death, for the fake of attesting what they knew to be a falshood, from which therefore they could expect no possible advantage in another life to recompense their miseries here; to suppose them, I say, not to be push'd on by the heat of a false religious enthufiasm, but to be deliberate, cool, and inflexible in fuch a purpose as this; and consequently to have intirely extinguished that love of ease, and aversion to pain and misery, which are so strong and universal in human nature; is supposing both against its reason and passions, and against the common experience

rience and observation of mankind. And in the present case, if the Apostles themselves believ'd the extraordinary facts which they have related, they must have been true; because the circumstances that attended them have been shewn to be such, that they could not be impos'd upon.

IF therefore, it be not unsuitable to our wifest notions of the supreme Being, to suppose him to take compassion on the ignorance and corruption of his reasonable creatures, and make at any time an extraordinary revelation of his mind and will; if fuch a revelation was highly for the advantage of mankind in their corrupt and degenerate circumstances; and if the Christian doctrine (as it is convey'd down to us in the writings of those who heard it from Christ himself, and were appointed to publish it thro'out the world) be in all respects worthy of God, and consequently worthy actually to be this revelation; the contrary to which has never yet been prov'd by the most learned and judicious of its adversaries; we are certainly under the strongest obligations to believe the miraculous facts by which it is supported, upon the credible testimony above-mention'd. For in no case that depends upon testimony can we have stronger evidence of the truth of a fact than this, that 'tis related by eye-witnesses, or actors in it, and persons of establish'd veracity. And if we refuse to admit it upon such evidence, when

when there is nothing in the abstract nature of the thing itself to invalidate their testimony, we destroy the credibility of all antient histories, and can indeed believe nothing upon tradition or testimony, nothing but what is subjected to our own senses.

NAY farther, as the ingenious Dr. Ibbot has very justly observed, * Since " the ac-" counts which the Evangelists have given " us in their writings, are of things which " they faw, and heard themselves, or had " from those who did so;" since " they lived " in the time and place, when and where " the things which they write of were pub-" lickly transacted; their writings deserve " greater credit than any other writings what-" ever. For how few of those things, re-" lated by other historians, are such as they " themselves were present at, and saw? 'Tis " needless to mention Herodotus, Diodorus " Siculus, Livy, Suetonius, Curtius, and o-" ther historians who have given us an ac-" count of the Assyrian or Persian, the Greek " or Roman affairs; and who have wrote of " things that were done many ages before " they were born, and in fuch parts of the " world as were very remote from their own " habitations. I shall only instance in one " writer, and that is Cornelius Tacitus, in " that part of his history, where he is giving

^{*} Sermons at Boyle's Lecture, p. 97.

"and takes occasion to tell us the whole flory of the city and people of the Jews from their first beginning. 'Tis scarce credible how many groundless and childish tales, what stupid and evidently false accounts that celebrated historian has heap'd together, and which he might easily have known to be such even in Rome itself where he liv'd, from the great numbers of Jews of all forts and ranks which resorted this ther, and especially from the history of Josephus, which was then in being, and at the emperor's command was reposited in the publick library."

Thus we have seen, that 'tis bighly probable the first propagators of the Christian revelation were not impos'd on themselves, and did not design to impose on others. The author of Christianity &c. supposes, that "we ought to be certain, that they could not be impos'd on themselves, and would not impose on others; or in other words, were infallible and impeccable *." But, (1.) I don't see how absolute infallibility can be necessary in order to their giving such a credible testimony as no rational man can doubt of; for none of the reports of sense are, strictly speaking, infallible. Is not therefore the testimony of eye-witnesses, if we are

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^{. *} P. 243.

fatisfied they actually faw the things they relate, sufficient evidence in any case? Shall we reject a probability that they were not deceiv'd, which in affairs of the greatest moment 'tis reckon'd madness to dispute, only because 'tis possible they might? Men can no more doubt of many things for which they have only probable evidence, than they could if they had the most certain and infallible demonstration. Indeed, what is it but probability that is the great spring of human actions, and determines our most important persuits? What but a credible testimony, a testimony not strictly infallible, that decides in all courts of judicature, where our most valuable properties, and even life itself, are concern'd? Is it not then fufficient to establish the credibility of the gospel historians, that the accounts they give are of things which they faw, and heard; and that to suppose they were impos'd on, renders the evidence of sense itself uncertain and precarious? Or, must we insist in this case alone, not only upon a good probability that they were not, but an absolute impossibility that they should be deceiv'd? Nothing can be more perverse and unreasonable. Again,

Why must it be thought necessary to make their testimony credible, that they should be impeccable? As without their being strictly infallible, we may have the highest proba-

probability that they were not deceiv'd; fo, without supposing they were impeccable, we may have fufficient affurance of their bonefty. Where is the man in the world that is impeccable? But is no man therefore to be believ'd? May we not be firmly perfuaded upon good grounds, that he has too much virtue and generofity to deceive us, without knowing that he cannot? And would it not be a very strange conduct, if men of approv'd integrity were not credited, even in cases upon which the happiness of life depends, only for wanting a character that is too perfect for human nature in the present flate? Must not at this rate, all the bufiness and commerce of mankind, all mutual confidence, and intercourse of good offices be fuspended, and every one stand single and belpless in the midst of society? Nay, must not societies disband, which we are fure can never be supported while there is universal jealousy and distrust? And let but the same credit be given to the testimony of the Apostles, of whom it has been prov'd that they were persons of great fincerity and virtue, as is constantly allow'd to the testimony of bonest unexceptionable witnesses in courts of judicature, and in all concerns of human life, and we must admit the truth of their history. For men have not the least doubt of things which are thus attested, if they are not in themselves incredible; they negotiate affairs, I 4 and

and run hazards upon such a probability; and therefore if they were fair and impartial, they would not scruple to believe Christianity upon the same evidence, and would act as that belief directs.

But our author proceeds farther, and advances some things which are more immediately to the purpose of the present argument, as they directly attack the integrity of the gospel historians. These therefore I shall particularly confider not for any strength that I apprehend to be in the objections themselves, or because I have so mean an opinion of this writer's good sense as to imagine, that he bimself believes there is any great weight in them, but that nothing plaufible may so much as feem to lie against the truth of their testimony. 'Tis needless to infift largely upon what he urges, from our Saviour's faying to those, who had prophesied, and cast out devils in his name, Depart from me ye that work iniquity*, viz. " that nei-" ther prophecies, nor miracles are absolute " fecurities for men to depend on +," because it may be granted they are not, if the doctrine that is taught be not in itself rational, and worthy of God. And as prophecies and miracles were only defigned to attest the truth of the doctrine, and not the honesty and virtue of the persons that preach'd it,

^{*} Mat. 7. 22, 23. † P. 245.

nothing can be inferr'd from hence that is a real prejudice to Christianity; especially if we suppose, what was undeniably true with respect to Judas, as long as he had the power, which this author speaks of, " of " doing miracles, even to the raising of the " dead *," that they were not openly, and scandalously immoral; and consequently, that their vices could not bring a dishonour upon the religion they propagated. Besides, how does this in the least affect the credit of those writers, on whose accounts of Christianity we depend? Because some prophets, and persons that did miracles, might work iniquity? Or, because " one of the Apostles " betray'd his master for the paltry sum of " thirty pieces of filver +," must they all be thus base, unfaithful, and treacherous?

But "the other Apostles not only sled," and deserted him, but the chief of them "for fwore him, as often as he was ask'd "about his being one of his followers; and he, as well as Barnabas, was afterwards "guilty of a mean piece of dissimulation." And Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp "contention, tho about a very indifferent "matter, as to cause a separation ‡." What does all this tend to? To destroy the general character of the Apostles as bonest and swell-designing men, and prove that the histo-

ries they wrote are not to be credited? Certainly no Inference can be more forc'd, and unnatural. For does a man's committing one or two base actions in the whole course of his life, tho attended with very heinous aggravations, absolutely destroy his credit, when he has given the strongest evidence of his having repented of them, and practised ever after such a strict and inflexible virtue, as no temptations, no hope of worldly advantage, or fear of fufferings could corrupt? Is no allowance to be made for the frailty of human nature, and sudden passions which disarm the mind, and render the fuccours of reafon useles? May not a person be so surpriz'd by an unexpected temptation, as to betray the cause of virtue, who would sooner die, than meditate and utter a cool deliberate falshood? And was not this beyond dispute the case of the Apostles?

IF when their grief had dispirited them, and in the consternation they were under at seeing all their hopes of a temporal kingdom disappointed, they sted, and deserted their master; they afterwards preach'd him boldly, in defiance of all the terrors of the world, and bore their testimony to the truth of his doctrine, miracles, and resurrection, with a noble contempt of dangers, and death. If Peter denied and forswore him, it cost him a deep and bitter repentance; and this repentance was demonstrated to be sincere by

his unshaken steddiness and constancy afterwards, and chufing deliberately to die rather than again deny him. And if he, as well as Barnabas, was guilty of a mean piece of dishmulation, to the betraying the liberty of the Gentile converts, in compliance with the stiffness and prejudices of the Jews, it does not follow that this was design'd dishonesty; might it not be a mere error of judgment about the prudential part of conduct? And to strengthen this, which is by far the most fair and candid supposition; was not his behaviour upon the whole the reverse of wilful falfbood? Or is every one who has once or twice diffembled and prevaricated, from a mistake more probably, than a principle of infincerity, a witness not fit to be credited; especially if when we view him in the general course of his actions (which is the only just way of estimating characters) he plainly appears to be a person of bonour and integrity, and when all circumstances conspire to confirm the truth of his testimony?

NOTWITHTANDING these blemishes and faults in the lives of the Apostles, we may, I am persuaded, challenge the adversaries of Christianity to produce witnesses so credible to any fact, in any age, or history, as they; men that overcame the strongest prejudices against the doctrine they embrac'd, and propagated; that asserted it in opposition to all their interests, and without the

least distant prospect of konour, or advantage; whom the cruellest persecutions could not discourage; nay, who bravely dy'd in desense of it. Let those who now take an ungenerous pleasure in aggravating their failings, consider the dissibilities they labour'd under, and the uncommon temptations with which they were oblig'd to encounter, and then ask themselves seriously, whether they know of any, who they have reason to believe, in such circumstances would have had fewer; and whether upon the whole, they are not very extraordinary examples of integrity and courage?

EVEN the weakness and cowardice they before discover'd, rather confirms than invalidates the testimony they gave afterwards. For that the very same persons should adhere inflexibly, to the cause of him whom they had deserted, with nothing in expectation but disgrace and sufferings, and dying the death of malefactors, can be accounted for no other way than this, that they were fensible of the crime they had committed, and had arm'd. themselves with the greater resolution. And what could be fufficient to animate and Jupport such a resolution, but a firm belief of the truth of the doctrine they preach'd? What, but their being convinc'd that it was their indispensable duty to urge and defend it; and preferring what they apprehended to be the cause of true religion, and the reformation

tion and happiness of mankind, to all other considerations? There is no proof in the world fo strong as this of mens being in earnest, and to urge their equivocating, and being afraid to own the truth in one or two instances as an argument why they are not to be depended on, when they afferted and maintain'd it to the hazard of their ease, liberties, and lives, is urging contradictions to support each other. With respect to the Apostles, the appearances of danger were not at all leffen'd, but more near and immediate. And therefore, when we find these same fearful men who had before manifested such weakness and pusillanimity, inspir'd with an invincible fortitude and constancy; we cannot help fuppofing what has been already fuggested, either, that they were more firmly persuaded of the truth of Christianity; or that when their fears betray'd them it was thro' furprize, whereas their after-conduct, in which they discover'd so much honesty and intrepidity, was the refult of their deliberate judgment, upon a full conviction of the necessity of such a behaviour; or else, that God afforded them extraordinary supports in proportion to the greatness of their trials, that they might bear up in publishing so excellent and u/eful a doctrine as the Christian revelation contain'd, against all the opposition that was made to it by the prejudices and vices of the world.

THE objection which the ingenious author makes against the characters of Paul and Barnabas, to lessen their credit as bistorians, or witnesses to the facts of Christianity, viz. that they " had fuch a sharp conten-" tion, tho about a very indifferent matter, " as to cause a separation," scarce deserves a grave answer. For stiffness, beat, and vebemence of temper, are very different things from dishonesty; and the proving against a person that he was apt to grow warm in dispute, and fometimes to quarrel with his best friends, would not (if his veracity was unblemish'd) be of the least weight, nor at all affect his credit as a witness in any court of judicature. And yet this is much more than can be shewn to be included in the present case. For the whole of the fact, as it is related in the acts of the Apoftles, amounts to no more than this; that they differ'd once about the expediency of chusing a particular person to be a companion in their travels (which might not be quite so indifferent a matter as this author represents it) and were each so intent and eager upon gaining his point, that they feparated upon it. But it does not appear, that they manag'd the debate in an indecent abusive way, or that they parted without a perfect friendship and esteem for each other.

AND as to what he adds farther with relation to St. Paul, that " even he fays, * The " good that I would, I do not; but the evil " which I would not, that I do. But I fee " another law in my members, warring against " the law of my mind, and bringing me into " captivity to the law of fin, which is in my " members. And a great deal more to the " fame purpose +;" I am forry to observe, that it shews a determin'd resolution, if possible, to asperse one of the greatest characters in history, whose generous services for the good of others, noble ardour in the cause of liberty, and inflexible self-denying virtue, none of the opposers of Christianity have ever exceeded, and few of them can pretend to equal without the most manifest disadvantage. Even an ingenuous adversary would take pleasure in doing justice to such extraordinary merit; and not entertain a thought of detracting from it; and the very attempt to represent this excellent Apostle as a slave to his appetites, influenc'd by carnal views, and one that acted against the reason and judgment of his own mind, must fink the reputation of any writer, with confiderate and impartial men.

But does he not expresly affert all this of himself in the passages referr'd to? Our author indeed seems to think so, but it ap-

^{*} Rom. 7. 19, 23. + P. 245.

pears from many other instances, as well as this, that the excellency of his genius does not lie in writing comments upon scripture; but that on the contrary, he frequently quotes independent passages merely for their found, and the appearance they make; which would be exclaim'd against as barbarous treatment of any other writers, and can serve only to amuse and confound an ignorant and inattentive reader. And with respect to the instance now before us, 'tis plain to every one that reads St. Paul's epiftles with care and a defire to understand them, that he was a most genteel and tender writer, and oftentimes speaks of things, that might otherwise be ungrateful and offensive, in his own name, when the characters he gives belong intirely to others, and not at all to himself. Thus in this very epistle to the Romans, * If the truth of God bath more abounded thro' my lye, why am I judged as a sinner? i. e. not I Paul, but I who make the objection. At other times, he puts himself into descriptions of the corrupt and deplorable state of Gentile idolaters before their conversion. And that we are to make use of this key, to find out the true sense of those passages in the 7th chapter to the Romans which this author has abus'd, is evident from hence; that the description there given is of a vicious man, who had pretty strong convictions of his duty, but acted against the light and dictates of con-

^{*} Chaf. 3. 7.

science; of one whose passions were too strong for his reason and brought him into captivity; who, was carnal, and fold under fin; a phrase that always denotes a state of wilful and babitual wickedness. And besides the great absurdity of supposing, that St. Paul defign'd to represent his own character in this view, at the same time that he set up for a reformer, and therefore was oblig'd to affect the appearance at least of extraordinary sanctity; besides this, I say, that he had not really fuch bad thoughts of himfelf, and confequently, that what he fays is intended as a representation of others, tho he speaks in his own name, is plain, beyond all dispute, from several passages in his epistles, in which 'tis undeniable he must mean himself perfonally; because he either vindicates his own character, or proposes himself as an example for imitation, or appeals to those to whom he wrote for his integrity. Thus particularly, in his epistle to the Thessalonians he says, Ye are witnesses, and God also, how bolily, and justly, and unblameably we behav'd ourselves among you that believe *. To the Corinthians, This is our rejoicing, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, or according to that excellent and perfect rule of morality which is contain'd in the gospel, we have had our con-

^{* 1} Ep. 2. 10.

versation in the world *; that he knew nothing by, or against himself +; that he kept under bis body, and brought it into subjection t. And to mention no more, he refents with a generous fcorn and indignation the scandalous charge of those, who reprefented him as walking after the flesh; and declares, that tho he walk'd in the flesh, he did not walk after the flesh **. Is it then at all natural to suppose, that he meant himfelf, when he drew a character directly the reverse of this; especially when we find, that it was a very usual thing with him (as indeed it is common with writers now) to speak in his own name things that were intirely design'd for others; and when it appears from the whole of his history, that he fully deferv'd that all those things should be affirm'd of him, which, notwithstanding his great modesty, he was oblig'd to mention in his own vindication, and to filence the calumnies of his adversaries? Such a method of explaining passages, is contrary to all rules of fair interpretation; and whatever other purposes it may serve, is the way to make any author for ever unintelligible.

It will be needless to take much notice of what is farther alledg'd ++ from the catholic epistle of St. Barnabas, "That Jesus, "when he chose his Apostles, which were

* 2 Ep. 1. 12. † 1 Ep. 4.4. ‡ 1 Ep. 9. 27]

** 2 Cor. 10. 2, 3. † P. 49.

" afterwards

" afterwards to publish his gospel, took men " who had been very great finners; that " thereby he might plainly shew, be came " not to call the righteous, but finners to re-" pentance *," be the words ever so much stronger and fuller in the original +; or of the scurrility of Celsus (of which I choose to give an English translation, that the unlearned reader may not think there is any thing of argument in it) viz. " that Jesus having " pick'd up ten or eleven infamous men, the " most profligate publicans and fishermen, " strol'd about the country with them, de-" manding [or begging and mumping for] " victuals in the most base and shameful " manner +;" 'twill be needless, I say, to take much notice of this, because whatever their character was before they became the followers of Christ, they behav'd afterwards, in the general course of their actions, with the greatest bonour and integrity, and gave fuch evidence of an ingenuous temper of mind as few histories can parallel. When they bore witness to the truth of Christianity, their lives in the main were unexceptionable, nay, fit to be propos'd as examples for the world

^{*} Wake's Translation, § 5. p. 272.

^{† &}quot;Οντας ύπες πάσαν άμαςτίαν άνομωτέςες.

[†] The words, as this author gives them in the Latin translation, are, p. 50. Jesum, ascitis decem undecimve famosis hominibus, publicanis, nautisque nequissimis, cum his ultro citroque sugitasse, corrogantem cibos sordide ac turpiter. Origen. cont. Celsum. l. 1. p. 47.

to imitate. And nothing but an uncommon degree of bonesty and resolution could break such strong habits of vice, and cause such a prodigious alteration in their conduct.

Nor do I think that what the ingenious author adds, " in support of St. Barnabas," either confirms his account of them before they were chosen to be Apostles, or in the least invalidates their testimony; viz. " that they " first became Jesus's disciples upon temporal " motives; and the belief of Christ's tem-" poral kingdom was fo firmly rooted in " them, that Jesus neither during his life, " nor even after his refurrection, was able " to remove it +." For does this prove that they were the basest and vilest of men? Nay, does their falling in with the common error of their countrymen prove, even in general, that they were bad men? How could perfons of real probity and virtue, become the disciples of one whom they took to be their Messiah, but upon temporal motives, when they had no notions of his kingdom but as a temporal kingdom? 'Tis plain, however, that tho they retain'd this false notion even after our Saviour's refurrection, they were at length convinc'd of their mistake, and propagated his doctrine without the least hope of preferment, or worldly advantage. And what better evidence could they give of their honesty

than overcoming their strongest prejudices; correcting a favourite and darling fentiment, upon which all their hopes were originally grounded; and adhering to the cause of Christ, not only when the temporal motives upon which they fet out ceas'd to operate, but in defiance of the bitterest reproaches, the greatest abuses and sufferings, and all the terrors of an ignominious, and cruel death?

THUS have I particularly confider'd every thing, that I know is urg'd by the author of Christianity, &c. against the moral character of the writers of the New Testament, with a view to weaken the credibility of their history. As this is a point of the highest importance, with which the truth of the Christian religion itself must either stand, or fall, I was not willing to pass by any part of it; tho perhaps I shall be censur'd for taking notice of some things, which may be thought too trifling to deserve a serious animadversion. And it must be a great pleasure to the friends of Christianity, that the most critical and malicious inquirers, who rake together all that looks plausible, and strain and exaggerate every circumstance, can find so few faults in the lives of men, who were call'd to act so nice a part, and met with fuch extraordinary temptations and difficulties. Theirs, it must be remember'd, in the whole extent of it, was a part but once acted; and therefore we can't K 3

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be fure, that the most virtuous, who struggle bravely with the common trials of life, would behave well in it. And the greatest of their defects are easily to be accounted for by suppofing, that, in the beginning especially, they were liable to furprizes, from which the most bonest and resolute are not always exempted, and by which they may be betrayed. We may therefore fafely rest the matter upon this issue, the capacity, and integrity of the writers of the New Testament, as what is fully sufficient to establish the credibility of their history. But there are some other circumstances that very much beighten the probability, which I shall therefore briefly mention. And,

- 1. It ought not to be omitted, that the fame facts are related in the gospels by four different historians; with so much agreement in all material passages, as has greatly the air of veracity; but with so much variety, as shews they were not wrote in concert.
- 2. THESE histories were publish'd but a few years after the facts recorded in them are pretended to have been perform'd, in a manner open and visible to the whole Jewish nation. The accounts contained in them, are also in several instances very particular and circumstantial, with specification of time and

and place, and of the names and characters of the persons concern'd; which made it much more easy (if there had been any) to detect the imposture. And this publication of them was not in remote and distant countries, where there was no danger of discovering the cheat, but upon the very same stage where the miracles are faid to have been wrought. Now all this is a strong probability, that the authors of these accounts were sure of the goodness of their cause, and did not fear the utmost wit and malice of their enemies. For 'tis hardly supposeable, that the most bold and impudent impostors would put the intire fuccess of their undertaking upon the truth of facts, that to a whole nation were notoriously false; and besides, 'tis morally impossible fuch accounts should gain credit; but on the contrary, pretences to known and public miracles, when nothing at all of that kind was perform'd, must necessarily have been confuted, and consequently have ended in the speedy and intire suppression and ruin of Christianity.

It has indeed been objected, that several books may have been written to expose the imposture of the first Christians, which afterwards, when they got the power in their own hands, by the conversion of the Roman Emperors, were destroy'd; but that no such contradictory accounts were ever publish'd, early enough to invalidate the authority of the K 4 gospel-

gospel-history, is to me most evident from a confideration that has been already fuggested, viz. that the immediate consequence of it (the world being so little inclin'd to favour Christianity) must have been its utter extirpation. And fince it was not crush'd in its very infancy, as without doubt it would have been, if those who propagated it had been convicted of fraud and knavery; nay, fince it grew and flourish'd in spite of all the oppofition that was made to it, which, upon the supposition that the gospel-history was contradicted and confuted, no reasonable man can account for; this affords the strongest prefumption, that a thing of that nature was never attempted, and consequently that the objection is a mere calumny, invented by the enemies of our holy religion for want of better evidence. I call it a calumny, because it is defign'd to throw an odium on a body of men upon mere furmise and conjecture, which has no folid foundation to support it; and if this must pass for evidence, no histories in the world can stand, because we cannot be fure, that they have not, at some time or other, been contradicted; and thus men may reject every thing which they have no mind to believe. We may observe,

3. WITH respect to the extraordinary and miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost after our Saviour's resurrection, that St. Paul in his epistles to Christian churches mentions these

these gifts as very common among them, appeals to their own knowledge and experience, and leaves the truth of Christianity, and his own authority to be intirely determin'd by this fact. But can we suppose, that any one of common modesty, shall I say, or common prudence, would act thus, if he knew that all he had wrote was false? Had it not a natural tendency to bring his character, and the cause in which he was embarqu'd, into contempt? And can it be thought, that among fuch numbers, none would have ingenuity and bonesty enough to contradict and expose such an impudent and barefac'd falshood? Would not fuch appeals, for which there was no real foundation, foon have been known by the enemies of Christianity; and could a few insignificant persons have stood the just ridicule and indignation of all the virtuous part of mankind upon fuch an occasion? Must not they, and the cause they had espous'd, have funk together?

But we find that the apostle Paul proceeds much farther, even to blame the Corinthians for an abuse of their extraordinary gifts, and particularly of the gift of tongues *; and can we think that they would have born this rebuke, if they had been so far from misimproving and perverting such extraordinary powers, that they were never posses d

In the 12th, 13th, and 14th chapters of his first epistle.

of them? Or would a man of any fense or knowledge of the world, especially a cunning impostor, have made an objection to which so ready an answer might be given, and an answer that must have been so much to his confusion, and greatly endanger'd his main defign? Mens vanity perhaps may be fo strong, that when they are commended for extraordinary qualities which they really want, they may think it agreeable enough, and not be forward to undeceive the world, by declaring themselves unworthy of the great honour that is done them; but when fuch gifts are mention'd in a way that is a reproach to them, the same principle will naturally incline them to detect the cheat. And there must have been the more danger of it in the case of the Corintbians, because there was a false Apostle among them, who fet himself up in opposition to St. Paul, and endeavour'd to lessen and degrade his ministry; for such a one, with the faction he had actually form'd, would undoubtedly have thought this an excellent handle to blast his credit, and it's likely, have made a merit of ruining his reputation by a shew of zeal for truth, and by discovering and exposing imposture.

It may seem strange, perhaps, notwithstanding all that has been said, if the extraordinary facts recorded in the New Testament were really perform'd, that no other histo-

historians, who liv'd about that time, should take notice of them; none but Christian writers, who are too much a party to have any confiderable weight in this controverfy, because they were engag'd to be advocates for them by their very profession of Christianity. To which the answer is plain (without entring at all into the debate how far the matter of fact is true) that the filence of historians as to some things which are unquestionable, is frequent in other cases, as well as in this; that it does not, in the nature of the thing, at all invalidate the testimony of those who are upon all accounts credible; that if we could not affign a reason for it, it would be no wonder, confidering that we know not the principles by which men are directed and influenc'd; that however, this omission might be owing to those facts not falling in with the general design of their history; and besides, it could not reasonably be expected, that while they continued Yews, or Heathens, they should relate events so favourable to a new religion, and by which they must condemn themselves, the one for rejecting their Meshab, and the other for perfifting in the idolatry and superstition of their ancestors; and if they became Christians upon the credit of these facts, their testimony would no more be admitted than that of other Christian writers of equal antiquity. But we have, to confirm the credibility of the gospel-history with respect to the miraculous

culous gifts of the Holy Ghost conferr'd upon the Apostles, &c. what fully supplies the want of this foreign testimony, and is is indeed abundantly superior to it, viz. the success of the gospel; an event, which is just what might be expected if this history be true, but upon the contrary supposition is very strange and unaccountable.

THAT a great part of the world is now Christian, we all know; we are fure likewife, that it has been fo for many ages past; and if we look back and inquire when it came to be so, we find by the concurrent testimony both of Pagan, and Christian Historians, that Christianity had its beginning in Judea, just at the time in which the sacred bistorians place it. And by the same testimony we learn, that in a very short space, in about forty years after, it was preach'd in all the provinces of the Roman empire; and that wherever it was preach'd, it made a very fwift progress, infomuch that in a few years, the number of Christians became very confiderable. For that they had increafed greatly at Rome, so early as in Nero's reign, we learn from the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus; who informs us, that when the Emperor, to clear himself from the charge of burning that city, laid the blame of it upon the Christians, and, began, under that pretence, a most severe and cruel perfeanelus

persecution of them, a vast multitude * suffered. And it was not much above fixty years, after the Apostles had dispers'd themfelves, in order to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, when Pliny proconful of Bythynia, wrote that epiftle to the emperor Trajan, in which, giving an account of the Christians, then under a severe persecution for their religion by the emperor's order, and defiring to be instructed how he should proceed towards them, he tells him, that " he thought it " a matter worthy of deliberation, chiefly " because of the great number of persons that " [by the laws against Christians] were in " danger of fuffering. For many of every " age, of all orders, and of both fexes are " call'd in question, and will be. For this " fuperstition has not only infected cities and " towns, but the villages and hamlets. " temples of the Gods are almost desolate, the " folemn rites of our religion have been long " neglected and omitted, and there are scarce " any who will buy the facrifices +."

Now what account shall we give of this great event? 'Tis utterly improbable, that

* Ingens multitudo. Annal. lib. 15. p. 365. Aurel. Allobrog. cum notis Lipsii.

† Visa est mihi res digna consultatione; maxime propter periclitantium multitudinem. Multi enim omnis ætatis, omnis ordinis, utriusque sexus vocantur in periculum, et vocabuntur: neque enim civitates tantum, sed vicos etiam atque agros, superstitionis illius contagio pervasit. Prope desolata sunt Deorum templa, sacra solennia diu intermissa, et rarissimi victimarum emptores. Epist. 97.

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Christianity prevail'd so much in the world in so short a time, only by natural means. The gift of tongues was absolutely necessary to enable the Apostles to propagate the gospel in all nations; and if they had a sufficient skill in all the languages of the different countries, without other miracles, they could never have convinc'd mankind that their master was a prophet sent from God, nor have engag'd them to submit to the authority of his religion. For suppose they had gone into any part of the world remote from Judea, and after they had affembled the people together, made a speech to them to this effect: " We come to preach to you in " the name of Jesus, and require you to " fubject yourselves to him, whom God hath " made the Lord of all. He was a great " king in Ifrael, and did many wonders in " that nation, tho he was hated and re-" jected by them, and at length crucified; " but God rais'd him from the dead on the " third day, and we faw him go into hea-" ven, where he is enthron'd in most glo-" rious majesty, and reigns over angels and " men. Cast away therefore all your an-" tient Gods; forsake your superstitious rites " and ceremonies; believe in him, and fub-" mit to his government; tho you get no-" thing by it in this world, but perhaps may " lose all you have, he will reward you for " it in his heavenly kingdom." What force, do you think, there would have been in fuch

a speech, to persuade the nations far distant from Jerusalem to fall down before him as their fovereign? Would they not have fmiled, and faid, "What do these bablers mean, " to bring us fuch strange stories from a fo-" reign land? Why should we acknow-" ledge him to be our king, whom his own " countrymen would not fuffer to rule over "them? What evidence do you bring us " that the things which you relate of him " are true? As you require us to renounce " the religion of our ancestors, and the Gods " whom we ferve, produce your credentials " from heaven." This was likely to have been the most favourable answer they would have met with, in any nation.

But the success of the gospel, without miracles to support it, will appear yet more incredible, if we consider the nature of the doctrine itself, which is so strict and pure, as must necessarily be ungrateful to the corrupt passions of men; their strong prejudices in favour of those religious principles in which they have been educated; that they could not embrace it without renouncing their most valuable present interests, and being expos'd to reproach and persecution; that it was publish'd by plain illiterate men, of no figure, or influence; and made its way in the most ingenious and civiliz'd nations, in oppofition to all the learning, power, policy, and malice of the world combin'd against it. These circum-

circumstances, I say, render the propagation of the gospel by natural means only still more incredible, and consequently confirm the reality of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost mention'd in the New Testament, which were exercis'd by Christians, according to the accounts they give, at the very time when Christianity first took root, and made its largest and most amazing progress. Can any rational man then refuse to believe that such extraordinary powers were actually communicated, when it appears besides, that there is the most credible testimony given to these great facts that can be defir'd in any case, how important foever; and the thing in general, viz. the introducing fo excellent a religion as the Christian into the world, is worthy the peculiar direction and care of providence? Or if he will not allow this, must he not chuse to believe a thing in a way in which he can never account for it, when he might give an easy and satisfactory solution of it to his own mind? Which is the wildest absurdity, and I might add (tho our adversaries perhaps will think it strange to be charged themselves, with what feems in their opinion to belong only to the believers of revelation) enthufiafm.

I HOPE it will not be thought a digression from my main design, if I briefly consider the peculiar weight and force of the argument from the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost,

Ghost, for the truth, and divine authority of the Christian religion. And,

1. WE find, that our bleffed Saviour, before his death, foretold this great event, and appeal'd to it as a future most glorious and convincing testimony of God in his favour. His words are very determinate and express, and have nothing of the ambiguity of the Heathen oracles: He that believeth on me, the works that I do, shall he do also: and greater works than these shall be do, because I go unto my Father *. And again: Nevertheless I tell you the truth, it is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the comforter (who is the Holy Ghost +) will not come unto you : but if I depart, I will fend him unto you, And when he is come, he will reprove, or convince, the world of sin, because they believe not in me; and of righteousness, of my integrity and innocence, and of the truth and justice of my cause, because I go to my Father *. If therefore this great event happen'd (as hath been already prov'd) according to his prediction, it must be a certain demonstration that he was fent of God. For it can't be imagin'd, that the perfectly wife and righteous governour of the world, would fuffer an impostor to produce such strong credentials of a divine authority; credentials, which as they appear'd in consequence of an

^{*} John 14. 12.

[†] Ver. 26, 14 (1)

t Chap. 16. 7-10.

appeal to him must be look'd upon as bis own testimony; and could not but deceive the most bonest and impartial of his creatures.

- firm the reality of the miracles, said to be performed by Christ in the course of his own ministry, by shewing undeniably that he was a true prophet; and put the truth of his resurrection out of doubt, by establishing, beyond all exception, the credibility of the Apostles testimony. So that they may justly be look'd upon as the strongest and fullest proofs of the truth and certainty of the Christian saith, because they render all the other proofs more clear and convincing, with the additional weight of new miracles. But besides this,
- 3. THERE are some circumstances in the fact itself, which render it the most important and complete evidence of the divinity of our holy religion. For instance, what could be more wonderful, than that illiterate men should give a scheme of natural religion more complete than any of the wisest of the philosophers ever did; and that they should be instructed, all of a sudden, in those points which they were before ignorant of, or concerning which they had the common mistakes of their countrymen? And as a judicious writer observes, "There is some—"thing in this gift of wissom peculiarly sitted." to

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to shew, that the doctrine it confirms came from God. Works of mere power might be perform'd by evil spirits; but that evil spirits should furnish men with the knowledge and ability to publish to the world a scheme of doctrine, in all the parts of it, the best fitted that could be to reform mankind, seems perfectly incredible *."

AGAIN, these miraculous powers were communicated to a greater number of perfons than in our Saviour's life-time, or any age of the world before; and that not in one country only, but in different, and far distant parts of the world. There was likewife a greater variety of them; and the Apostles were not only endued with them themselves, but could confer them upon others, a manifest sign that the power of God constantly attended them. All which circumstances render the proof of Christianity, by this fact, most fure and convincing. For tho if a doctrine be worthy of God, and tends to promote the practice of virtue, and the happiness of mankind, one or two real miracles are fufficient to establish its authority; yet in this case, we cannot be so certain of the truth of the facts as when they are more numerous; because 'tis more likely, that one or two men may have a lucky and

L 2

dextrous

^{*} Jeffery's Christianity the perfection of all religions, &c.

dextrous way of doing a trick, so as constantly to amuse and astonish the spectators, than a great number, some of whom, 'tis highly probable, will, one time or other, by a bungling performance, discover the fraud; and the same miracles perform'd in various, and far distant parts of the world, where the actors cannot have frequent communication with each other, are less liable to dispute, than such as are confin'd to a particular country.

To which let me add, that the gift of tongues is, in itself, of all miracles one of the most plain and unquestionable. For 'tis possible, thro' their ignorance of the powers of nature, that men, in many instances, may look upon those things as miraculous effects, which are only the fecret operations of natural causes; but we all know the force of nature fo well, that we are fure the knowledge of a language cannot, in a natural way, be attain'd in an instant; because words are arbitrary figns, and therefore can only be understood by learning, and retaining in our memories the particular ideas they are intended to express; upon which account, it must take up a very considerable space of time, for a man to get himself so well acquainted with several different languages, as to be able to converse easily and familiarly in them all. So that this in particular, and the other miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, by reason of

of the peculiar circumstances that attended them, may justly be esteem'd the strongest proof of the truth of our religion; as they are in themselves most certain and indisputable, and contain the united evidence of miracles, and the accomplishment of most express and determinate prophecies, concerning which there can be no controverly; and as they corroborate, and render more firm and unquestionable every other part of its external proof. And finally, 'tis to this extraordinary evidence (as we have feen) that we must ascribe the swift and extensive progress of the gospel; which is a kind of flanding miracle, to supply in a great measure to us in these remote times, the want of those other miracles before our eyes, which were common in the first ages of Christianity.

The greatest part of what has been said hitherto, relates only to the books of the New Testament which were universally receiv'd; but what must we think of those, which were controverted in the most early times, when their authority could be best settled; the epistle to the Hebrews, for instance, and the epistle of James, the second of Peter, the epistle of Jude, the second and third of John, and the book of the Revelation? I answer, that if the genuineness of these books could not be prov'd, Christianity would be but little affected by it; because those which are uncontestable, contain a complete account

L 3

of the Christian doctrine, and the evidence by which it is supported; nay, if we were only fure of the four Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, these alone would be abundantly fufficient. Nor will the determining this question, which way soever it happens, weaken in any material point the force of what I have already advanc'd, in which I have taken care all along, to argue only from those books, the authenticness of which, as far as appears, was never disputed; and consequently of whose being really authentic, we have all the probability that the circumstances of the case will bear; as great at least (and upon some accounts, I think, it has been shewn to be much greater) than there is with respect to any writings besides, of equal antiquity. But there are several things urg'd to prove, that the authority of those books that were not at first universally acknowledg'd, is not so dubious and uncertain as it has been represented; and which, tho they may not amount to an equal probability, may be thought a probability bowever, that they, as well as other books which were never question'd, are the genuine writings of the Apostles of Christ. The substance of the argument upon this head, I shall give in the words of the late pious and judicious Bishop Blackall *.

^{*} Sermons as Boyle's Lecture 4to. Sermon the third; p. 20, 21, 22.

". HE fays, " that there is good evidence from antiquity, that these contro"verted books were received in the most early
times, by those who had the best opportunity of satisfying themselves of the authors, and authority thereof, viz. by those
to whom they were sent, and in general
by the whole Greek church.

" 2. THAT 'tis no wonder, that these " books (being written either to Christians " difpers'd, and confequently only publish'd " by giving out copies thereof to fome, to " be communicated, as there was opportu-" nity, to others; or else to private persons, " living perhaps at great distance from the " places from which they were fent) were " not so easy to be attested, and upon that " account were not at first so generally re-" ceiv'd, as the others were, which were " either written to particular churches, to " which the authors hands, and the meffen-" gers that brought them were well known, " or which were first publish'd and receiv'd " in the same places where they were writ-" ten. And,

"3. THAT even those churches which did for some time doubt of the authority of these books, were persuaded at last to receive them as the authentic writings of the Apostles, or other inspir'd men. If there-L4 "fore

" fore it be suppos'd, that while they doubted " of these books they had reason for their " doubt; that is, that they did it because " they were not as yet fully fatisfied that " they were Apostolical writings, (which the " objectors, I believe, will readily enough " grant) it may be very reasonably presum'd, " that they had afterwards greater reason " to lay afide their doubt; and that when " they did receive them, it was, because " there had been then lately fuch evidence " and attestation given of their being written " by the Apostles, or other inspir'd men, as " they had not heard of before, fuch as they " could not then, with any reason contra-" dict or gainfay; for ordinarily, a less rea-" fon will persuade a man to take up an " opinion at first, than will persuade him to " go back from an opinion (how weakly " foever grounded) which he has before em-" brac'd and defended."

THE fact, as it is here truly stated, is just what it might be presum'd would happen, with respect to such writings as these. A sufficient account is given why they were not at first universally receiv'd; nay indeed, why it was not to be expected they would be, supposing them to be authentic. But upon this supposition it's natural to believe, that tho it might be a considerable time before they could be attested in such a manner, as to give satisfaction to all Christians, they would

at length however appear to be genuine; and be receiv'd accordingly (as they really were) even by those churches who for some time doubted of their authority.

" So that (as the same author adds) this " objection is so far from lessening, that it " rather strengthens the proof we have of " the authority even of those once contro-" verted books; and it is, besides, a very " good corroborating evidence of the autho-" rity of all the other books of the New Tef-" tament. For the backwardness of some " churches to receive these controverted books " at first, (when they had nothing to object " to the matter of them) makes it evident, " the Christians of the first ages were not " fo very eafy and credulous as fome have " represented them; that they did not so " very greedily swallow any book for divine " revelation that contain'd a great many mi-" racles, mix'd with a few good morals, " without making due inquiry concerning " the author, and the authority thereof. " But on the contrary, their being so hard " to be perfuaded to receive these contro-" verted books for some time, while they " wanted, as they thought, fufficient attef-" tation, (altho the doctrine of them was in " all points agreeable to the doctrine of the " other books which they had before re-" ceiv'd; their being so hard, I say, to re-" ceive these books) of the authority of which " there

" there nevertheless really was such evi-" dence, as they themselves, after having " well weigh'd and confider'd it, declar'd " themselves satisfied with, gives very good " ground to believe, that they had from the " beginning, fuch evidence as was without " exception of the authority of all those other " books (that is, of much the greatest part) " of the New Testament, which were never " controverted, which were from the first, " and with universal consent receiv'd by all " Christian churches. For if there had not " been very undeniable evidence of their be-" ing the genuine writings of the Apostles, or " other inspired men, there would certainly " have been the same doubt and controversy " concerning them, that there once was " concerning these."

But supposing the authority of all the books of the New Testament to be fully establish'd; how can we be sure, that they are transmitted down to us just as they were written? That having been often transcrib'd, they have not been corrupted, and alter'd very much by the ignorance or carelessness of the transcribers? Or, that several, even material passages, are not curtail'd and mangled, and others interpolated by the different parties of Christians, in the heat of their opposition to each other? By which means the face of Christianity may be vastly chang'd, and render'd quite another thing from what

it was in the beginning. " If no court of " judicature, tho in a thing of small mo-" ment, will admit of a copy, tho taken " from the original, without oath made by " a difinterested person of his having com-" par'd it; because the least mistake, a va-" rious pointing, a parenthesis, a letter mis-" plac'd may alter the fense; how can we " absolutely depend in things of the greatest " moment, on voluminous writings, which " have been so often transcrib'd by men, " who never faw the original; (as none, " even of the most early writers, pretend " they did) and men too, who even in the " earliest times, if we may judge by the " number of forg'd passages, and even forg'd " books, would scruple no pious frauds *." And accordingly, there are actually in the present copies of the New Testament, no less than 30000 various readings, which this author (as all others of the same stamp) frequently mentions as a very formidable thing; which shews, they think, plainly, that these copies are in fact so very corrupt and erroneous, as not to be depended on.

I THINK it very strange, that ingenious men, who are able to entertain the world much better, should tire it with stale objections, which have been so often consider'd, and thoroughly answer'd; and particularly, that the

^{*} Christianity as old &c. p. 324.

author of Christianity &c. should publish a large book, (that from the great expectations that were rais'd concerning it, one might justly imagine, would contain somewhat new and decifive upon these points) in which old difficulties are reviv'd, without letting his readers know that any folutions of them have ever been attempted, and what those folutions are; or endeavouring to shew that they are weak and insufficient. Such a conduct must be nauseous to those who are already well-ver'sd in controversies of this kind, and looks too much like a design to mislead the injudicious and unwary. And after all, what do these objections amount to? Why, to a possibility of forgery, but nothing at all of that kind prov'd; a possibility of corruption, but no one material corruption, interpolation, or omiffion pointed at, which has not been discover'd, and consequently being known, can be of no differvice to Christianity; and at this rate all the writings of antiquity may be forg'd, or corrupted; 30000 various readings, the common fate of books that have been often transcrib'd, but none of them shewn to be of such moment, as to disguise, or alter any important doctrine of the Christian religion: so that they would fignify nothing, if they arose to twice that number.

But there are several things that make it highly improbable, notwithstanding the inclination of some of the first Christians to pious

pious frauds, that there are any important alterations and corruptions in the books of the New Testament: and these, I make no doubt, will have great weight, fince there is nothing but bare suspicion on the other side. We have no direct reason to think they are corrupted, and feveral very confiderable probabilities that they are not. And if these are fufficient to fatisfy a fair inquirer; especially, if the copies of the New Testament are found to be as pure as those of other antient writings which are depended upon, and are not thought to be so perverted in any particular passages as to create confusion, or at all to hinder, but that the general sense of them may be easily understood; it matters not, whether, according to present establish'd forms, they would be admitted as evidence in a court of judicature. For it may be great perverseness and folly in private persons, in the common affairs of life, and, I think likewise, with respect to religion, in which, as it is the most important concern of mankind, probabilities ought always to determine, not to believe things, and form their conduct accordingly upon fuch proofs, as may not (perhaps for wife reasons) be allow'd to decide in the administration of public justice.

THE only question in short is this, whether men ought not to be guided by real probabilities, without inquiring at all, how far they are admitted in some particular circumstan-

ces; and whether fuch probabilities may not be sufficient to convince the judgment of their own minds, as will not fometimes pass in courts of judicature? If this be denied, mankind must in most cases sit still, believe nothing, and do nothing; they must drop their most laudable and useful designs; and all the great affairs of the world will be at a stand. And if it be allow'd, (and nothing in the world, I think, can be more plain) the next thing to be confider'd is, whether, the authority of the books of the New Testament being already establish'd, there be not a sufficient probability to persuade us, that they are convey'd down to our times fo pure and uncorrupt, as that all Christians may from thence get a perfect idea of the Christian doctrine? If this likewise be proved, the necessary confequence from the whole will be, that it is highly reasonable for us to receive them as the rule of our religious behaviour, when we can advance nothing to the contrary but possibilities, and ill-grounded suspicions; and that the methods of courts of judicature (which infift frequently upon clearer proof, than is necessary barely to convince men of the truth of facts) ought to have no influence or weight at all with us, in the present inquiry. *

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^{*} I thought what is offer'd above, a sufficient answer to the author of Christianity's reasoning from the practice of courts of judicature, and therefore did not trouble myself

But to come more directly to the point. Let us examine if there be really any ground to suspect that the text of the New Testament is so corrupt, as to render its authority precarious and doubtful; or whether, all appearances do not rather favour the contrary supposition. And,

WHEREAS the author of Christianity &c. infinuates, that the writings of the New Tef-

to examine any farther; but I have fince been inform'd by a very ingenious friend, who is thoroughly acquainted with the methods of proceeding in these courts, that 'tis a great mistake to say, that they "will not admit of a copy, tho taken from the original, without oath made by a disinter-" ested person of his having compar'd it;" and that the true state of the case is this, where better evidence can be had, they will expect the best. Where the original is extant, or there is a person living who has compar'd the copy with the original, a court of justice will expect, either that the original itself be produc'd, or else the oath of the person, who has compar'd the copy with it, that he believes it to be a true one; and that for this very good reason, because fuch proof may be had. But in cases, where it appears that the original is lost, as by fire, or any other accident; or where a deed is of fuch great antiquity, as that it may reasonably be suppos'd to be lost; and a copy is produc'd of such antiquity, that none who could be witneffes to the comparing it with the original can be suppos'd to be living; such copy is constantly admitted as evidence, without any oath of its having been compar'd. So that (as he adds) our author's argument drawn from the practice of courts of judicature. can never serve his purpose, unless the original writings of the New Testament were still extant, or at least had been in being fo very lately, that fome persons, now alive, might be suppos'd to have compar'd our present copies with them; but as the case really stands, is monstrously absurd, fince it requires what is, in its own nature, impossible, suppofing the present copies to be perfectly genuine and exact.

tament are not much to be depended on because they have been so often transcrib'd; it may be replied, that some of the copies we now have are of great antiquity, particularly the Alexandrian, which was made so early as the fourth century, and so might be taken from some at least of the originals themselves, which, Tertullian says, were to be seen in his time; or else, from copies that were taken directly from the originals. However, let what will come of this, we have as good presumptive proof of the integrity of these writings as can reasonably be desired.

For if we look into the books themselves, we shall find one uniform consistent scheme thro'out the whole; the same intire barmony, and agreement in all the parts, as might be expected if they were carefully and faithfully transmitted down to our times; and none of those contrarieties, and clashing accounts of sacts or doctrines, as must have been unavoidable to a great degree, if they had been alter'd and perverted in material passages. And,

Besides this internal mark of purity, which, upon the supposition of gross corruption, is not to be accounted for, there are several other circumstances, that taken all together, afford a very considerable probability; viz. that these books were, from the beginning,

beginning, read in all Christian assemblies; and frequently quoted by the earliest Christian writers; that many copies of them were taken, and dispers'd in various parts of the world; and that they were very foon translated into several languages: so that if we suppose that some copies might be corrupted, we cannot believe that the corruption could be universal, without infinuating, what is too mean and scandalous to serve any cause, that the whole Christian world concurr'd in the cheat. We ought rather to argue (as being a more just, as well as charitable and generous way of reasoning) that as all honest men are greatly concern'd for the purity of religion upon which their bighest interests depend, 'tis utterly improbable fuch a thing could be effected; and to increase the improbability, let it be confider'd, that there were different sects of Christians who narrowly watch'd each other, and would have been ready to detect and expose all impostures of this kind; or if it was possible, that when the Christians had got the temporal power into their hands, that party which was uppermost might corrupt some copies, and destroy all the rest; besides, that this is but barely possible, but not at all credible, confidering the great number of copies that were dispers'd every where, and the variety of translations; a thing of this nature could not have happen'd without being loudly complain'd of; it must

have put the whole Christian world in an uproar, and given the enemies of Christianity a vast advantage against it; some account of which, as of other confusions and disturbances in the church of less moment, would undoubtedly have been preserved in some or other of the writings of those ages which are still extant, composed by men of different parties, and interests.

AGAIN, we know that some corruptions have been detected, which confirms the main of the preceding argument, and shews clearly, that there was far from being an inclination among Christians universally, to countenance and support such base and knavish designs; and the same bonest disposition, the same capacity, and diligence, would probably have discover'd and expos'd all such frauds. And,

Finally, our present copies agree, in all points of importance, with all the most antient versions; and with the numerous quotations that were made from the books of the New Testament by the most early Christian writers. So that upon the whole, we have stronger evidence of their purity, than we can have with respect to any other books of equal antiquity, in which, it was not so much the concern of all virtuous persons to prevent corruptions; which are not quoted by so many other

other authors; and of which copies and translations were not so frequent, nor so widely dispers'd.

Bur notwithstanding all these seeming probabilities, is there any arguing against plain fact? Are there not " 30000 various " readings in the copies of the New Testa-" ment as it stands at present?" not to mention " innumerable copies that have been " loft, which, no doubt, had their different " readings *" also. And does not this prove great unskilfulness or negligence in the transcribers at least, if not wilful corruption? To this several things are replied, viz. that the various readings rather tend to fettle the true text, than confound and pervert it; that those writings, of which there are the fewest copies, are the most corrupt of any, and cannot be amended; - that there have been more copies and translations of the New Testament than of any other antient book whatfoever, and consequently, it is reasonable to expect there should be more variations; — but that in proportion to the number, there are full as many differences in the copies of the purest authors of antiquity; and that the most corrupt copies we have, are, in all effential points, fufficiently exact to give men a just notion of

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 324.

Christianity, and consequently to answer the end for which those writings were originally design'd. But let us hear what is said upon this head by one, who will be allow'd to be as accurate a judge in controversies of this kind, as any age has produc'd.

"IF (says this most learned author) there had been but one manuscript of the Greek Testament, at the restoration of learning about two centuries ago; then we had had no various readings at all. And would the text be in a better condition then, than now we have 30000? So far from that; that in the best single copy extant, we should have had hundreds of faults, and some omissions irreparable. Besides that the suspicions of fraud and soul play would have been increas'd immensly.

"IT is good therefore, you'll allow, to have more authors than one; and another "MS to join with the first would give more authority, as well as security. Now chuse that second where you will, there shall be a thousand variations from the first; and yet half or more of the faults "shall still remain in them both.

"ATHIRD therefore, and so a fourth, and still on, are desirable; that by a joint and mutual help all the faults may be mended:

"mended: some copy preserving the true reading in one place, and some in another. And yet the more copies you call to affist tance, the more do the various readings multiply upon you: every copy having its peculiar slips, tho in a principal passes fage or two it do singular service. And this is fact, not only in the New Testament, but in all antient books whatever.

"'T is a good providence, and a great bleffing, that so many manuscripts of the New Testament are still amongst us; fome procur'd from Egypt, others from Asia, others found in the Western churches: for the very distances of places, as well as numbers of the books, demonstrate that there could be no collusion, nor altering, nor interpolating one copy by another, nor all by any of them.

"In profane authors (as they are call'd)
"whereof one manuscript only had the luck
"to be preserv'd, as Velleius Paterculus a"mong the Latins, and Hesychius among
"the Greeks; the faults of the scribes are
found so numerous, and the defects be"yond all redress, that notwithstanding the
"pains of the learnedst and acutest critics
for two whole centuries, these books are
"still, and are like to continue a mere heap
"of errors. On the contrary, where the

M 3 "copies

"copies of any author are numerous, tho the various readings always increase in proportion; there the text, by an accurate collation of them made by skilful and judicious hands, is ever the more correct, and comes nearer to the true words of the author.

"TERENCE is now in one of the best " conditions of any of the claffic writers; " the oldest and best copy of him is now in " the Vatican library, which comes nearest " to the poet's own hand; but even that has " hundreds of errors, most of which may " be mended out of other exemplars, that " are otherwise more recent, and of inferior " value. I myself have collated several; " and do affirm, that I have feen 20000 va-" rious lections in that little author, not near " fo big as the whole New Testament: and " am morally fure, that if half the number " of manuscripts were collated for Terence " with that niceness and minuteness which " has been used in twice as many for the " New Testament, the number of the varia-" tions would amount to above 50000.

"In the manuscripts of the New Testa"ment the variations have been noted with
"a religious, not to say superstitious ex"actness. Every difference in spelling, in
"the smallest particle or article of speech,
"in

"in the very order or collation of words without real change, has been studiously registred. Nor has the text only been ransack'd, but all the antient versions, the Latin Vulgate, Italic, Æthiopic, Arabic, Coptic, Armenian, Gothic, and Saxon; nor these only, but all the dispers'd citations of the Greek and Latin farthers in a course of 500 years. What wonder then, if with all this scrupulous search in every hole and corner, the varieties rise to 30000? when in all antient books of the same bulk, whereof the MSS are numerous, the variations are as many, or more; and yet no versions to swell the reckoning.

" THE editors of profane authors do not " use to trouble their readers, or risk their " own reputation, by an useless list of every " fmall flip committed by a lazy or ignorant " fcribe. What is thought commendable in " an edition of scripture, and has the name " of fairness and fidelity, would in them be " deem'd impertinence and trifling. Hence " the reader not vers'd in antient MSS is " deceiv'd into an opinion, that there were " no more variations in the copies, than " what the editor has communicated. Where-" as, if the like scrupulousness was observ'd " in registring the smallest changes in pro-" fane authors, as is allow'd, nay, requir'd " in facred; the now formidable number of " 30000 would appear a very trifle. "TIS M 4

"'Tis manifest, that books in verse are " not near fo obnoxious to variations, as " prose: the transcriber, if he is not wholly " ignorant and stupid, being guided by the " measures; and hindred from such altera-" tions, as do not fall in with the laws of " numbers. And yet even in poets, the va-" riations are fo very many, as can hardly " be conceiv'd without use and experience. " In the late edition of Tibullus, by the " learned Mr. Broukhuise, you have a re-" gifter of various lections in the close of that " book; where you may fee at the first " view that there are as many as the lines. " The fame is visible in Plautus, set out by " Paræus. I myself, during my travels, have " had the opportunity to examine feveral " MSS of the poet Manilius; and can affure " you, that the variations I have met with, " are twice as many as all the lines of the " book. --- Add likewise, that the MSS " here used were few in comparison: and " then do you imagine, what the lections " would amount to, if ten times as many " (the case of Dr. Mill) were accurately exa-" min'd. And yet in these and all other " books, the text is not made more preca-" rious on that account, but more certain " and authentic.

[&]quot; — If a corrupt line, or dubious reading chances to intervene, it does not dark-

" en the whole context, nor make an au-" thor's opinion, or his purpose, precarious. " Terence, for instance, has as many varia-" tions, as any book whatever in proportion " to its bulk; and yet with all its interpola-" tions, omissions, additions, or glosses (chuse " the worst of them on purpose) you can-" not deface the contrivance and plot of one " play; no, not of one fingle scene; but its " fense, design, and subserviency to the last " iffue and conclusion, shall be visible and " plain thorow all the mist of various lec-" tions. And so it is with the sacred text; " make your 30000 as many more, if num-" bers of copies can ever reach that fum: " all the better to a knowing and ferious " reader, who is thereby more richly fur-" nish'd to select what he sees genuine. But " even put them into the hands of a knave " or a fool: and yet with the most finistrous " and abfurd choice, he shall not extinguish " the light of any one chapter, nor disguise " Christianity, but that every feature of it " will be the fame *." I make no doubt but that the reader will eafily excuse this long quotation, as it fets the matter of the various readings in so clear a light, and shews that there is not the least difficulty in it; tho at the same time, he must be at a loss what

^{*} Remarks on a discourse of Free Thinking, by Phileleutherus Lipsiensis; p. 64—68. and p. 76. edu. 5th.

to think of the fairness and modesty of those writers, who without being able, or pretending to be able to confute any part of it, still go on in the old track, and think to bear down all before them by consident and ground-less infinuations.

THE author of Christianity (among the rest) has not said one word to all this; only he feems to think it not fufficient, because " one or two various readings [in the New " Testament] where most things are own'd " to be of the greatest moment, may be of " that consequence, as to destroy the design " of the whole book †." To which I anfwer, that may-be's go for nothing at all; and that it would be time enough to reply to this when he has produc'd any readings of such great consequence. However, to shew that there is nothing in the objection, let it be confider'd, that various readings which destroy the whole design of revelation, must be such as pervert some effential doctrines of it. Suppose then, that in two, or three places, the text of the New Testament was so corrupted as to affert, " that God is " not wife, just and good; that Jesus is not " the Christ; that men might practise ido-" latry; or deceive, and persecute each " other; or that there is no future state," and the like; fuch readings could not, and

ought not to be admitted as the true readings, contrary to the general and most evident strain of the revelation: but every one would naturally look upon them as the errors of transcribers, and not as the original words of the writers, to whose sentiments they not only bear no resemblance, but are a manifest contradiction. And indeed if we judge otherwife 'tis impossible for us to find the sense of any author whatever. So that if men reafon fairly, and as they ought to do, one, or two various readings cannot destroy the design of the whole New Testament; because readings of that importance being directly contrary to the plain and unquestionable design of it, it must be as probable, as a thing of that nature can be, that they are false readings.

But admitting the credibility of the gofpel-history to be sufficiently establish'd, and that we have all the probability we can defire, that the books of the new Testament are convey'd down to us pure in all material passages, how can the common people upon rational grounds be fatisfied of these things? " Religion either does not concern the ma-" jority, as being incapable of forming a " judgment about it; or it must carry such " internal marks of its truth, as men of " mean capacity are able to discover: or " else notwithstanding the infinite variety ', of religions, all who do not understand " the original languages their traditional re-" ligions

" ligions are written in, which is all man"kind, a very few excepted, are alike bound
"in all places to pin their faith on their
"priests, and believe in men, who have an
"interest to deceive them; and who have
"feldom fail'd to do so, when occasion
"ferves.

"CAN people, if incapable by their rea-" fon to distinguish truth from falshood, " have any thing more to plead for the " truth of their religion, than that they " believe it to be the true religion; because " their priests, who are hir'd to maintain it, " tell them it was a long while ago reveal'd " to certain persons, who, as they, on their " priestly words, affure them, were too wife " to be impos'd on themselves; and too " honest to impose on others: and that no " change could have been made in their re-" ligion in after-times; the care men have " of their own fouls, as well as their na-" tural affection for posterity, obliging them " from generation to generation, to hand " down their religion just as they receiv'd it: " and that it was morally impossible inno-" vations should creep in, fince it would be " the highest folly in any to attempt to in-" troduce new doctrines, as a tradition re-" ceiv'd from their ancestors; when all must " know they had receiv'd no fuch tradition. " As this is all, the bulk of mankind, if " they are not capable of judging from the " doctrines

"doctrines themselves of their truth, can say for their religion; so they, in all places, make use of this argument; and with equal considence aver, that, tho all other traditionary religions are full of gross falshoods, and most absurd notions, which their priests impudently impose on them as divine truths; yet our own priests are such faithful representers of things, that one may as well question the truth of all history, as the truth of things believ'd on their authority.

"This boasted argument, in which men of all religions so much triumph, if it proves any thing, would prove there never was, nor could be any false religion, either in whole, or part; because truth being before falshood, and mens ancestors having once posses'd it, no change could afterward ever happen: whereas on the contrary, tho there have been at times great numbers of traditional religions, yet as far as it appears, no one of them has long remain'd the same; at least, in such points as were merely sounded on tradition.

"I SEE no middle, but that we must "either own, that there are such internal "marks fix'd to every part of the true reli-"gion, as will enable the bulk of mankind to distinguish it from all false religions;

" or else, that all traditionary religions are " upon a level: fince those, who, in every " country, are hir'd to maintain them, will " not fail to affert, they have all external " marks; fuch as uninterrupted traditions, " incontested miracles, confession of adversa-" ries, number of proselytes, agreement among " themselves; and all those other external " arguments, that the Papists and Mahome-" tans fet so high a value on. In this case, " what can the common people do, who " understand not a word of the language, " their religion, and its external proofs are " writ in, but be of the religion in which " they are educated; especially, if nothing " is fuffer'd to be publish'd, which may, in " the least, tend to make them question its " truth; and all other religions are repre-" fented as full of the groffest abfurdities *." Now in answer to this, which I have not abridg'd, that the reader may fee this author's reasoning in its full strength, I obferve.

THAT the defenders of revelation have no reason to assert, that a traditional religion is to be receiv'd upon the mere foot of authority; but there are certain internal characters absolutely necessary in order to its being a divine revelation, which men of mean capacity are able to discover. For instance,

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 232, 233, 234.

the principal defign of all reveal'd religion must be to restore and establish natural; to give mankind just and worthy notions of God. and afcertain the principles and obligations of morality; and to promote the true rational perfection and happiness of human nature: and all its positive institutions, and peculiar doctrines, it is reasonable to expect, will be intended as helps and motives to virtue. In general therefore the people are capable, by their reason, of judging whether any particular traditional revelation be worthy of God; they are not requir'd to believe it implicitly even upon the authority of miracles; and consequently, a tradition of miracles is not all they have to urge in support of it.

But the proving that the peculiar doctrines of revelation are not repugnant to reason, nor unworthy of God, is only an argument that they may be true, and not a sufficient soundation upon which to conclude they are really true. Here then comes in the attestation of the miracles, to convince mankind that what their reason approves as worthy of God, actually proceeds from him. And therefore it must be own'd, that the common people cannot rationally believe the truth of any traditional revelation that contains doctrines which reason could not discover, unless they can have full satisfaction, that the histories they have of such doctrines, and

of the miracles wrought in confirmation of them, are authentic, and credible. So that the question to be resolv'd, is in short this; whether, as they are capable of discerning the internal marks of the truth of Christianity, they are not likewise able to form a rational judgment concerning the credibility of the gospel-history, and its conveyance down to our times without any material alteration, or corruption.

IF the common people can judge of fuch kind of proofs (as uncontested miracles must establish the truth of any doctrines that are agreeable to reason, and adapted to advance true goodness, and which belong to what is upon the whole a most useful and perfect scheme of morality; and consequently against which, as very fit to be parts of a divine revelation, no objection of weight can be form'd) they may have sufficient reason to believe the traditional revelation in which they are educated; tho there are not "fuch internal " marks fix'd to every part of it, as alone will enable them to distinguish it from all " false revelations." It will indeed have this general internal mark to distinguish it from all false revelations, that the wise and beneficent defign of its author will plainly appear in the whole frame of it, and that even its peculiar principles will stand the test of reason; but tho they may be fuch as reason cannot condemn, and which, if true, must have a con-

confiderable influence upon our moral conduct, 'tis most evident (as has been already hinted) that this of itself does not prove they are true: fo that fomething, befides internal marks, may be absolutely necessary to establish the credit of a revelation that is worthy of God; or in other words, of a revelation, which, after the strictest inquiry, we may apprehend it to be agreeable to his perfections to communicate to mankind. And farther, if the bulk of mankind are able to judge of the authenticness and credibility of antient histories, it must be a great mistake of the author of Christianity &c. that if such " internal marks are not fix'd to every part " of the true religion, as will enable them " to distinguish it from all false religions, " all traditionary religions are upon a level." For let "those who in every country are " hir'd to maintain them, be ever fo confi-" dent in afferting, that they have all ex-" ternal marks; fuch as uninterrupted tra-" ditions, uncontested miracles, confession of " adversaries, number of proselytes, agree-" ment among themselves, and all those o-" ther external arguments that the Papists, " and (as he fays) the Mahometans fet fo " high a value on;" the common people being able, as will prefently be shewn, upon a view of what is offer'd on both fides of the question, to distinguish between true and false pretences, are no more under a necesfity of being impos'd upon, or of embracing

a traditional religion implicitly, than they are of believing without evidence in points of the most pure and abstract reasoning, which do not at all depend upon tradition.

ALL this shew of argument therefore is plainly founded upon the supposition, that the generality must take a traditional religion intirely from the authority of their priests, and that this is all they have to plead for the truth of it: but as we have only the author's bare affertion for this, it will undoubtedly go for nothing. It must pass however for a specimen of a very extraordinary kind of reasoning, first to lay it down as a fundamental principle, that if men are incapable by their reason, without the testimony of miracles, to discover every part of a traditional religion, " all who do not un-" derstand the original languages their tra-" ditional religions are written in, which is " all mankind, a very few excepted, are " alike bound in all places, to pin their faith " on their priests;" and to think this sufficiently prov'd by asking, what " they can " have more to plead for the truth of their " religion, than that they believe it to be " true, because their priests tell them so " and so;" and then upon such a slender foundation to declare, that " all traditiona-" ry religions are upon a level;" and that the common people have nothing to do " but to be of the religion in which they « are

"are educated." The consequence would indeed be just, if the premises were true; but there happens unluckily to be this great defect, that the premises, which are the very thing in dispute, are taken for granted; and that the author of Christianity &c. seems to take the putting a question how a thing can be, to be an argument that it cannot be; which, it must be allow'd, is a very expeditious and easy way of deciding all controversies.

I PROCEED now to answer the question directly, how the common people may be perfuaded of the truth of facts, the knowledge of which depends upon tradition; of the authenticness, for instance, of the books of the New Testament, the credibility of the accounts contain'd in them, and that they have not fuffer'd any material alteration in the conveyance. That this is the truth of the case has been largely proved; the only thing therefore that remains to be shewn is, that the people are capable of feeing this proof. And what is it that is necessary in order to this? Why only, that they have proper materials upon which to form a right judgment, and a capacity of judging upon those materials.

To obtain the first, let them set themselves to examine the truth of Christianity with an bonest, attentive, impartial mind, and read carefully what is offer'd on both N 2 sides,

fides, for it, and against it; and then, if what has been hitherto written is sufficient to determine the controversy, they must know all that is necessary to be known, in order to the making a rational judgment about it. Upon this supposition they know as much as the writers themselves, who may be prefum'd to have deliver'd their fentiments in the fullest and strongest manner they were able; and consequently have as extensive a view of the subject as men of learning, and much fuperior improvements. Nor is it necessary to their attaining sufficient skill in this controversy, that they read every thing which has been written upon it, or may be written hereafter, (which would be too laborious and voluminous an inquiry for the generality of mankind, an inquiry, that their opportunities and circumstances in life would not perhaps admit of) for as the subject has been often handled, there are scarce any two writers of note but contain all that is material. Thus far then, I think, is very plain, that if the dispute can be decided by what the learned have written, and consequently by what they know about it, the common people, who by reading may be furnish'd with all their ideas, must be able to form as rational a judgment; provided the point itself to be determin'd be not above their capacities: Nay, 'tis not at all abfurd to suppose, that they may often make a truer judgment; because

because they may pursue their inquiries with minds more free from prejudice, and better disposed to allow every argument its proper weight than those, who with their greater abilities, have too frequently strong attachments to a particular scheme, make it their business to puzzle and confound what they cannot answer, and dispute not for truth but victory.

Now what is there in the present case, that is above the capacity of the bulk of mankind? Are not all who will exercise their reason and examine impartially, able to judge, upon a view of the arguments on both fides, whether the books of the New Testament are prov'd to be forgeries; or whether it be prov'd on the contrary, that they were constantly ascrib'd to the authors whose names they bear; that they are supported by the same undisputed tradition as other antient writings which are univerfally allow'd to be genuine; and consequently, that the rejecting them as spurious destroys the authority of all antient histories, which stand upon no better foundation? If they are unable to judge, upon having the whole evidence before them, whether these, which are plain matters of fact, are prov'd or no, they can judge of no facts whatever. And what confusion would fuch a notion of the common people occasion, if it was brought into civil life?

N 3

AND if the people can judge of the proofs which are offer'd for the authenticness of the books of the New Testament; it will sure be triffing with the understandings of men to attempt to flew, that they are able to judge when it is fufficiently prov'd that historians are credible, and whether the objections which are made against their testimony are strong enough to fet it afide. For being convinc'd that these accounts were written by eyewitnesses; if they cannot judge whether it be prov'd, that eye-witnesses in the relation of fuch facts could not, confidering all circumstances, be imposed on themselves; and that they were men of fuch integrity (demonstrated by the general course of their behaviour, by their attesting these things in opposition to their worldly interests, and chusing ALL not only to suffer, but die, rather than retract their testimony) as cannot rationally be suspected of a design to impose on others; I say, if they are incapable of judging when this is fully prov'd, the consequence will indeed be, that they ought never to believe any thing upon testimony, nay farther, that they cannot understand the nature of bonesty and morality itself. And what would become of the world if this was true? All commerce between man and man must immediately be suspended, and the defign of their focial nature be intirely defeated.

THE same may be said with respect to corruptions; the common people must be capable of discerning, when they see what is offer'd on both sides, whether this charge is prov'd or not; whether any instances of gross corruption are produced, and clearly shewn to be such, or the whole of what is advanc'd be only surmise and conjecture, contrary to all the probabilities of things; otherwise, they cannot be judges of probability in any case; and consequently, considering in how sew of the affairs of life higher evidence can be had, their reason must be in a manner useles.

So far am I in my judgment from thinking it of service to the Christian religion, that the liberty of writing against it should be at all restrain'd, that I would have it encourag'd to the utmost; and cannot think, of a better method to fix, even the vulgar, more firmly in the belief of the gospelhistory, than reading the objections of its adversaries. This, I am persuaded, will give a greater weight to the arguments which are urg'd to establish its authenticness, credibility, and purity, in the most excellent defences of Christianity. Let them read for instance Christianity as old as the creation, &c. or any other book where the same things are faid in a much narrower compass, and when they find, instead of direct proofs

proofs of forgery with respect to the writings of the New Testament, only groundless sufpicion, and infinuations that there may be forgery, and that none of the writers on this fide of the question are so hardy as to pretend, that the authenticness of far the greatest part of them was ever disputed in the most early ages; when they find what trifling things are objected against the capacity, and integrity of the gospel historians, and how they strain and rack their invention to raise difficulties, which, after all, amount to nothing but to destroy the credibility of the most unexceptionable testimony, and make men distrust their very Jenses; and that as there is nothing of moment urg'd against the authenticness, and credibility of the books, there is not the least probable evidence given that they are corrupted in any material branches of christian doctrine, nor a fingle corruption of consequence pointed at, but what was before discover'd by the honesty and diligence of Christian writers, which is a strong presumption that these writings are, in general, pure and entire; and finally, when they find, that all the stir which has been made about various readings comes to no more than this, that there are the same differences in the copies of the New Testament as are to be found in the copies of the purest authors of antiquity; and that there is not fo much as an attempt made to prove, that these differences are of any great

great importance (only perhaps they may be, but these writers themselves do not take upon them to fay they are) or that they obscure, disguise, and pervert any essential doctrine of the Christian revelation; when, I fay, the people find, that this is all the most ingenious and subtil opposers of Christianity have to offer against its authority, (which is indeed nothing more than may be urg'd against the authority of all antient books) they will, and ought to conclude, that its great facts stand uppon so fure a foundation as cannot be shaken. 'Tis natural for them to reason thus, that if any thing more material could be advanced, men of their skill would undoubtedly be able to produce it; and they cannot imagine that tis for want of an inclination to make a home thrust, that they deal in possibilities instead of direct and positive proofs, but because they know they have no other arguments to make use of. The people can have no ground to suspect, that the adversaries of their religion have any more important objections in reserve, than those which they have already urg'd. For tho the terror of penal laws (which are but weak supports of a false religion, and unnecessary to guard the true, that being never fo well defended, as when it is left to make its way by the force of its own evidence) I fay, tho the terror of penal laws may restrain them from making a direct and open attack upon Christianity,

stianity, which is the establish'd religion; experience teaches us, that they are not at a loss for ways, in which to say the freest things both against the miracles, and doctrine of Christ and his Apostles. And it may be justly question'd, whether by this artful infinuating method, in which there is more room for evalion, and men cannot be kept fo strictly to the rules of close reasoning, they have not done more prejudice to the Christian cause, than they could, had they been allowed to throw off all disquises, and argue professedly against it; and consequently, whether this be not the method they choose to proceed in? But be that as it will, it can't be expected that the people should fuspend their belief of reveal'd religion, till they are fure no more objections can, or will be made to it: for at this rate they can fix on nothing, but must indulge to eternal scep-It is not their business to concern themselves about what may one time, or other, or perhaps never be offer'd; but to be determin'd by the evidence they have. And therefore if Christianity, upon a serious examination of the reasons on both fides, appears to their minds to be a rational institution, and supported by sufficient evidence, they ought to believe and submit to it; and continue to acknowledge it as a divine religion, till these stronger arguments, if any fuch there be, are produced, and convince their judgment of the contrary. THUS

Thus have I shewn, that the common people, if they will give themselves time to read, and consider, need not take the Christian revelation implicitly from their ancestors, or their priests; but are capable of discerning both the intrinsic goodness of the doctrine, and its external proofs. It must be own'd, that the difficulty is much greater with respect to those persons who cannot read, or want proper opportunities and advantages for making inquiries of this kind themselves: but however, even theje are so far from being, univerfally, under a necessity of implicit faith, that very many of them, at least, may, if they will, form their judgment upon a rational conviction. Of the intrinsic excellency of a revelation they are all judges; and in order to judge of its external proofs, let them find out a person that is well skill'd in this controversy, and of whose veracity they are well affured (and fuch an one, it cannot be denied, but many of the most ignorant and illiterate vulgar, if they exercise the same care and prudence as they would in chusing a person, to advise and manage for them in the common affairs of life, may eafily find) and let him lay before them fairly and impartially the substance of the argument on both fides, upon which they may maturely deliberate and determine. 'Tis evident, that in this case, they do not take the judgment of another about a point of Specu-

fpeculation, but only his representation of a matter of fact: they do not trust to his understanding, but his integrity.

IF it be faid, that they trust his underflanding so far, viz. to give them a judicious state of the argument in its full strength: I answer, that the People may indeed make a wrong choice; but, as I hinted before, if they are fincerely defirous to be rightly inform'd, there are vast numbers, to whom it will be no fuch great difficulty to pitch upon a person whose capacity cannot be disputed; fo that there will be but little danger of their being imposed on, if they can rely upon his bonesty. However, for their greater fecurity they may apply to feveral, and try how far their accounts agree. And let it but be allowed, that persons who have such opportunities, and act with that prudence and caution which the importance of the inquiry deserves, may have as good reason to be satisfied in this case, as they have in other matters of the greatest moment, wherein they depend upon the information of men of known abilities, and unquestionable veracity, we defire no more. For this supposes, that they may have a sufficient probability of the truth of the Christian religion; fuch a probability as leaves no rational ground of doubt; and which it is always, and justly thought their wisdom to be determined by, in all other affairs of consequence. After all

all it must be own'd, that this method may be attended with some difficulties, but, I think, not with greater than men often meet with, and get successfully thro', in the management of their fecular concerns; and with respect to those who cannot inquire for themselves, and likewise want opportunities to get proper information from others, I make no scruple to allow, that their belief of a traditional revelation must be implicit; but yet it may be of great use to them, if they have frequent opportunities to hear it read and explain'd, by fixing in their minds the principles of natural religion, and giving them fuch just notions of morality, as, 'tis probable, they would never have attained by their own private reflections.

I H A V E all along taken it for granted (because it is the true and natural state of things which God designed) that the common people will read, and consider, and make use of those belps which are in their power, in order to understand the proofs of the truth and purity of a traditional religion. And 'tis sufficient, that if they do this they may form a rational judgment of these points; and as much as can be said with respect to natural religion itself. For let the religion of nature be ever so plain to the diligent and impartial inquirer, men will as necessarily be ignorant of that, if they are indolent, careless, and unthinking, if they neglect the use

of their reason, or suffer it to be darkned by superstition and prejudice, as of the evidences of an external revelation. The knowledge of the one is no more to be obtained without proper reslection, than of the other; and a careful examination will discover both. Nay, I can't help thinking, and appeal to every man who has made observations on the world, that the meanest of the people will judge more easily of the proof of matters of fact, and the credibility of testimony, than of abstract and close reasonings even upon moral subjects.

IF it should be objected, that 'tis not probable that the bulk of mankind, confidering their education, circumstances, the influence of fenfible objects, how little they are used to reasoning, and how much their thoughts are engaged by the necessary business and cares of life, will think and examine: I anfwer, that then they must take the consequence, which is, that they will have no certain rule at all of their actions, and know as little of the laws of reason, as of the true grounds of revelation; so that this proves no more against a standing revelation being a proper means of instructing them in their duty, than against reason itself. And tho it should be allowed, that in countries where free debate is discouraged, and forbidden under severe penalties, and the people are obliged to take their accounts both of a revelation.

velation, and its proofs, from certain particular persons authorized and maintained for that purpose, they can have no more reason to believe even a true traditional revelation, than others may have for believing a false one; this, I apprehend, does not in the least affect the present argument, because it is purely accidental; and such accidents, in the present state of the world, while men are ambitious, designing, and interested, and apt to impose upon their fellow creatures whenever they have it in their power, are unavoidable.

THE just state of the question is, whether revelation be not, in itself, a proper rule for the generality of mankind, a rule, of which (when things are as they ought to be) they are able to judge; whether they cannot discern both its intrinsic goodness, and external proofs tho depending on tradition. As it has been already shewn that they are capable of this, must it not be perverse in any to infinuate, that it was not fit for God to communicate it, because the wife and gracious defign of it happens to be in a great measure deseated by the wickedness and craft of some, and the slavish implicit submission of others? The Christian revelation was undeniably of great use when it was first published, in reforming the corrupt sentiments and manners of the world; and let it prevail now as far as it can rationally (particularly

ticularly in those blessed nations of light and liberty, where far the greater part of the people may be judges upon what foundation it stands) and it will continue to be of eminent advantage. I shall only add, that if in some countries the common people are so inslaved, and kept in such ignorance, as to be hardly capable of judging fairly of the proofs of a traditional religion; by the same methods of imposition and restraint, by grafting superstition upon their fears, and an artful management of their credulity, their natural notions of good and evil have been abominably, and almost universally corrupted to such a degree, that it was not reasonable to expect, without an extraordinary affistance, that they would ever recover themselves out of their degenerate state, to the knowledge and practice of the true religion of nature. Of this the old Heathen world, and, if we can credit modern accounts, Heathen nations at this day, are most notorious and flagrant examples.

I know but of one difficulty that lies against what has been said under this head, which has not been already obviated, viz. that the same exercise of reason, the same thought and impartial inquiry, which is necessary to enable men to see the true grounds of a traditional religion, will discover all the principles of natural religion, without a revelation. What advantage is there then

in a standing revelation, above mens being left to the mere light of reason? To which it will be sufficient to give this short answer, that allowing what this objection supposes to be true, it does not at all affect any part of the preceding argument; my business being only to prove, against the author of Christianity &c. who afferts the contrary, that the common people are able to judge of the truth and purity of a traditional revelation, without concerning myself at all with the debate, whether they might, or might not, by the same pains and care, attain to a complete knowledge of the religion of nature. However, I shall add farther, that as this does not render an external revelation in any degree less useful, when the reafon of mankind is in fact corrupted and darken'd; it has likewise, when men are upon rational grounds convinc'd of the truth of it, these two great advantages, as a standing guide, beyond the fole direction of natural light; that it furnishes a more uniform, confistent, and universal rule of duty, than could reasonably be expected, considering mens different capacities, humours, prejudices, and the like, if every one was left to form a scheme of morality for himself; and affords stronger motives to the practice of virtue, particularly by affuring us of the eternity of future rewards, which to mere reason is at best obscure, and doubtful.

'T WILL be needless to make remarks on this author's account of the external proofs of a traditional revelation; because the he affirms it is all that can be faid, the reader, I make no doubt, after what has been fo largely offer'd upon this head, will think it fuch an imperfect and partial representation, as could not be given but by one, who either had not thorowly confidered the argument, or chose to urge it so weakly that he might the more eafily triumph. Let me only observe, that it is so far from being the whole of the argument against innovations in a traditional religion, " that it was morally impossible " innovations should creep in; the care men " have of their own fouls, and their natural " affection for posterity, obliging them from " generation to generation, to hand down " their religion just as they received it;" and, " fince it would be the highest folly " in any to attempt to introduce new doc-" trines, as a tradition receiv'd from their " ancestors; when all must know they had " receiv'd no fuch tradition;" this, I fay, is fo far from being the whole of the argument, that 'tis really one of the most minute and inconsiderable branches of it: the improbability of innovations and corruptions, with respect to the Christian revelation, arifing, as I have shewn, almost intirely from particular circumstances, and plain facts, which strongly intimate the contrary. And there-

therefore his answer to this boasted argument, as he calls it, (tho I know of none that use it as an argument of itself, much less that triumph in it) if it might pass as sufficient, were the argument urged in a general way, and the strength of the cause rested upon it, whether the tradition was written, or oral, and whatever was the state of the world; when it is mentioned only as a collateral circumstance, confirming other probabilities upon which the chief stress is laid, is weak and trissing.

THERE is another objection still behind, which the author of Christianity &c. frequently urges, viz. that if the common people could be fatisfied, upon rational grounds, of the authenticness, credibility, and purity of the books of the New Testament, yet, confidering that the meaning of words is perpetually changing, the difference of languages, and the peculiar stile and manner in which these books are written, they are a rule not much to be depended on; nay, a rule that's very unsafe and dangerous, unless the people mend and improve it, by their reason; as tending to give them false and dishonourable notions of God, and of the methods of his moral providence, and lead them into great mistakes with respect to morality. " None, " who confider how differently the circum-" stances of human affairs, which are con-" tinually changing, affect men; but must

" see 'tis scarce possible, that the doctrines " which were originally taught, or the prac-" tice originally us'd in any institution, " should long continue the same; nothing " being more easy than to vary the fignifi-" cation of words *. - Had there been but " one language, and a book writ in that " language, in indelible characters, (fo that " there could be none of those thirty thou-" fand various readings, which are own'd to " be crept into the New Testament) and all " could have access to it; yet even then, " confidering how uncertain the meaning " of words are; and the interest of design-" ing men, to put a wrong fense on them; " it must be morally impossible this reli-" gion could long continue the fame *.-" In short, there are scarce any words in " any one language, except of fuch things " as immediately strike the fenses, that are " adequately answer'd in another, so as ex-" actly to comprehend the same ideas; and " if the ideas are only fewer, or more, " what confusion may not that occasion? " how great and frequent must the mistakes " then be, in translating the antiquated " languages of people, who liv'd at a vast " distance of time, as well as in countries far " remote; and affected hyperbolical, pa-" rabolical, mystical, allegorical, and typi-" cal ways of expressing themselves, as op-

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 286. * Page 288.

" posite to the usage in other parts, as East is to West? and not only this, but it " will be likewise necessary to have an ac-" curate knowledge of their manners, cuf-" toms, traditions, philosophy, religious notions, fects, civil and ecclefiaftical po-" lity; of all which the common people " know as little, as they do of the original " languages; who having very obscure and " incompetent conceptions of the principal " words and phrases used in the versions, " their religion must needs be a very odd " jumble of confused and inconsistent no-" tions, were it to depend on words, and " their precise meaning; and not on the " things themselves and their relations, which " are plain and obvious to common capa-" cities; they would be in a manner intirely " govern'd by founds *.--Should the " chance of education throw men into the " true traditionary religion, yet confidering " its stile is not very exact, there being ge-" nerally more express'd than is meant; " and things of the greatest consequence ' are often fo treated, as that men can't " from thence perceive the nature and ex-" tent of their duty; and even precepts of " the greatest moment are sometimes so far " from being deliver'd plainly and fimply, " that they are express'd after a general, " undetermin'd, nay, hyperbolical manner; " fo that even in this case, there's a ne-

" cessity for the common people to have " recourse to the reason of things †."

Now in answer to this I observe,

I. THAT what is here faid in general about " the changing fense of words, and differ-" ence of languages," affects all antient books as well as the writings of the New Testament; and must prove, if it proves any thing, that they cannot be translated into modern languages, fo as to give an unlearned reader a just notion of the defign and meaning of the authors even in the plainest passages, or upon the most common and intelligible subjects; nay, that they cannot be understood by the learned themselves (for if they may be understood 'tis most certain they may likewise be translated) and consequently that the study of dead languages, and of all the valuable remains of antiquity, is perfectly useless and trifling. The very same things may be faid with respect to the old Heathen moralists, which the writers of our author's stamp pretend to understand, and likewise to translate; that " confidering how uncertain the mean-" ing of words is, it must be morally im-" possible the sense of them could long con-"tinue the same;" and "that there are " fcarce any words in any one language, " except of such things as immediately strike " the fenses, that are adequately answered † Page 236.

" in

"in another, so as exactly to comprehend the same ideas; and if the ideas are only fewer, or more, what consussion may not that occasion?" But tho this would be esteemed ridiculous enough if applied to common authors, it must pass for very good sense when urged against revelation; and why when the nature of the thing is the same? Truly, for no cause but because they will have it so, as it is necessary to secure a favourite point, that must by no means be dropt. Is not this trisling with the name of reason, and most egregious partiality, and inconsistency?

ADD to this, that the sense of the words used in the original writings themselves is now, just what it was when the books of the New Testament were first written; because it is a dead language, and consequently has not undergone that flux, and those variations, to which living languages, in a long course of time, may be subject,

But is there not great difficulty "in "translating an antiquated language, that "abounds with hyperbolical, parabolical, "mystical, allegorical, and typical ways of "expression, as opposite to the usage in other parts, as East is to West?" Without doubt, what difficulty there is must ly intirely here; and if the author of Christianity &c. had treated this part of the argument

ment with that good judgment, which he shews himself to be master of upon some other occasions, he would have infifted only on this; and not have faid so much about " the various fignification of words, the " difficulty of fixing their meaning, and ex-" pressing the same thing so, as to convey the " fame ideas in different languages," the consequence of which, how plausible soever it may feem, is really, that all antient authors are unintelligible; and that all attempts to give just translations of them, and express their true sentiments in a modern language, fo that persons, who want either capacity, or opportunity for confulting the originals themfelves, may read and understand them, are idle and romantic. Now in order to remove this objection let it be consider'd,

2. That these writings, the obscurity of which is so much complain'd of, were chiefly and more immediately design'd for the use of that age in which they were composed; when sigurative expressions were easy and familiar, and parables and allegories usual methods of instruction. The moral precepts of our Saviour, and the doctrines which he taught in person, being all deliver'd, either in public discourses to the men of that generation, or in private instructions to his disciples, 'tis natural to expect the common phrases, idioms, and peculiar ways of expression, that were then in use; nay indeed, the usual forms

forms of speaking were the most proper way of communicating his sentiments to those with whom he convers'd; and it would have look'd odd, if one man should have attempted to frame a new language, or if he had avoided those peculiarities, by which the language of the country where he was born, and educated, was distinguish'd from that of other nations. And the same may be said of writings, which we always find to be in that style, and manner, which generally prevailed in the places where they were first published.

But besides that the books of the New Testament were intended primarily, and more directly for the benefit of that age (as all books are that are publish'd in any age) and consequently must be written in the language, style, and manner of expression, that was most familiar both to the writers and readers; besides this I say, it may be observ'd more particularly, that feveral of them are only occasional; and were written either at the request of particular persons, which perhaps was the case of St. Luke's gospel, and the Acts of the Apostles, both inscrib'd to Theophilus; or else, upon some special incidents that occur'd, and requir'd that the apostles should interpose, and give directions both to private christians, and whole churches. And certainly 'tis most unreasonable to expect, in fuch writings, any other than the common phrales,

phrases, and idioms, that were then in use in those parts of the world, how different soever from the languages of other countries, and especially from the genius of modern languages. So that 'tis a mistake of the author of Christianity &c. that " precepts rela-" ting to morality are deliver'd in the New " Testament after an obscure manner, when " they might have been deliver'd other-" wise: *" This, I say, is plainly a mistake in the sense he intended it, viz. That there is an affected obscurity in the moral rules laid down in the gospel; because the manner of writing therein used, was, all circumstances confider'd, by far the most natural; a way that the writers themselves had always been accustom'd to; and which took, most generally, among the persons directly concern'd.

The inference I would draw from all this is, that the books of the New Testament, tho they may be obscure to us at this distance, might, notwithstanding the figures, parables, and proverbial expressions that are frequent in them, be a very plain and easy rule of morals to the age when they were written, and for whose use they were chiefly, and more immediately design'd. For as words are arbitrary signs of ideas, sigurative and proverbial ways of speaking, or writing, when they are the common turn of a

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 27.

language, may have as certain and determinate a meaning as the most plain and simple expressions, and convey precisely the same ideas to all: otherwise, all the antient eastern languages (as well as the modern which abound very much in strong figures) must have been absolute jargon and confusion, and could not answer the end of language. To which we may add, that the obscurity of some parts of the New Testament, to us, may arise from the general method of epistolary writings, in which there is a peculiar conciseness; and frequently dark hints, and references to facts, and customs; or to passages in the letters to which they are an answer; all which was perfectly understood by those to whom they were directed. This I take, confidering the time when, and the persons for whom it was more immediately written, to be a complete vindication of the ftyle of the New Testament; and a sufficient proof, that notwithstanding the parables, proverbial, and figurative expressions that are used in it, it might be a clear and intelligible, and most useful system of religion and morality.

But our author has a text against this, being very dextrous at quoting scripture against its own authority, and sufficiency *, viz. "That without a parable Jesus spake not to the multitude +; and for this remarkable

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 332. † Matt. 13. 34. " reason,

"reason, that seeing they might see, and not perceive; and hearing they might hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins be forsiven them *." By which he would instinuate, that our Saviour made use of parables on purpose to make his discourses unintelligible to the bulk of the people; and for sear lest they might have been prevailed upon, if he had delivered his doctrine more plainly, to forsake their evil courses, and be happy. A very strange design indeed in one that pretended to be a teacher sent from God; and that it was the chief end of his mission to call sinners to repentance.

To fet this matter in a just light, let it be confider'd, that parables were common methods of instruction among the Jews; and that our Saviour, in conformity to the custom of the age, and nation in which he lived, sometimes used them by way of illustration, to inculcate important and useful principles in a more strong, and, at the same time, a very plain and familiar manner. Parables of this kind, as that of the rich man and Lazarus, of the pharisee and publican, and feveral others, were eafily and universally understood. Nor was it likely that any inconvenience would follow upon using parabolical ways of expression, when they were common; because all the people know-

^{*} Mark 4. 12.

ing that there was one grand point pursued, would attend only to that; and not be apt to frain every circumstance, which was added to maintain the propriety and decorum of the parable, and render the whole reprefentation confistent, and beautiful; or extort mysteries from it, which were not in the intention of the speaker. So that 'tis most evident, that the view of Jesus, when he spake in parables, was not always to disguise his fentiments; and much less to wrap himself up in such impenetrable darkness, that the people might not understand, nor consequently receive any benefit from his discourse; but on the contrary, to affift their apprehensions, and represent the great principles of religion, and moral obligations, both in a more easy way, and with greater spirit and force.

But then it must be own'd, that at other times, when he apprehended that the truths he was about to deliver would give great offence, he made use of parables to conceal his design in some measure, that it might not appear all at once, and provoke the passions of his hearers. And in my opinion, this is so far from being a reflection upon his conduct, that it shews the great wisdom and tenderness of this divine teacher; and that he studied the most effectual methods to promote the great end of his ministry, the reformation and happiness of mankind. For what good purpose could it possibly serve, to speak

ungrateful and offensive truths openly and bluntly; which, being contrary to mens prepossessions and prejudices, would naturally irritate and inflame their minds? There is a great deal of art and address necessary in dealing with the multitude; especially in a person who would correct epidemical vices, and remove their favourite, most facred, and venerable prejudices. In fuch cases, falling upon the point directly will infallibly harden the vicious, the designing, and interested; and perhaps fo far engage the passions even of the more bonest and ingenuous in the debate, as to hinder the cool and impartial exercise of their reason; and by this means, not only frustrate the good effect of our endeavours to reclaim them, but render their errors more incurable. Whereas, if we infinuate things in fuch a way that persons shall not immediately fee our defign, and consequently in a way that gives no fudden provocation, nor alarms their prejudices; tho they do not understand our meaning at first, yet afterwards, the teachable and well-dispos'd, in their private calm and deliberate reflections, will very probably discover what was intended; and be convinced likewise of its reasonableness and importance; and so receive great benefit by it. And as for those who are inslaved to evil babits, and prejudic'd in favour of their vices, 'tis no matter whether they understand it or no; because while there is such a perverse temper of mind, there is scarce any hope

hope of their being reform'd; and the plainest and most important truths are likely to have little, or no influence upon them.

Now that this is the whole of what is meant in that passage of St. Mark's gospel, which is cited by the author of Christianity &c. is evident from all the circumstances of the history, as it is related by the Evangelists. The fense, which he infinuates, is in itself so very strange, improbable, and unaccountable, confidering the great benevolence of disposition, and ardent desire to instruct and reform the world, which our bleffed Saviour always discover'd, that 'tis hard to conceive how any fair and candid reader can imagine it to be the true sense; but besides, it will foon appear that it really is not. For what is express'd by St. Matthew thus, All these Things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables, and without a parable spake he not unto them *; is explain'd by St. Mark just in the manner I am speaking of, And with many such parables spake be the word unto them, as they were able to bear it; but without a parable, i. e. as the connection necessarily requires, because they could not bear a more free and undifguis'd way of talking, spake he not unto them +. And exactly parallel to what is here faid, are our Saviour's words in the 11th and 12th

^{*} Mat. 13. 34.

verses. And he said unto them, [i. e. to the twelve] unto you [who have humble, honest, well dispos'd minds] it is given, or allow'd to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those that are without [and are under the power of Strong prejudices] all these things are done in parables; that seeing they may see, and not perceive, and hearing they may bear, and not understand; i. e. because such could not bear a plain and naked representation of the truth, it was necessary that the light of it should be somewhat clouded, and veil'd under parables and allegories, that it might not offend their weak minds, which were corrupted and perverted by the force of prejudice, and the prevalency of irregular paffions. The phrases, that seeing they may see, and not perceive, and bearing they may hear, and not understand, mean no more than if it had been said, because seeing they see not, &c. and hearing they hear not, &c. and therefore it is actually express'd thus in St. Matthew's account of the same discourse, which may be consider'd as a comment upon St. Mark's shorter history, and is a clear and full explication of it. Therefore speak I to them in parables, because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, who saith, By bearing ye shall bear, and shall not understand, and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive. For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes bave

have they clos'd; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their bearts, and should be converted, and I should heal them *.

ADD to all this, that the darkest of Christ's parables might be understood, with respect to their general design and tendency at least, by an attentive and considerate hearer; which is a plain proof, that tho they might be very proper to soften and palliate his meaning, when prudence requir'd it, they could not be defign'd to render it unintelligible, or even difficult to find out, to persons who gave themselves time for cool reflection and examination. And therefore we are told by St. Mark, that when his difciples inquir'd about this very parable of the fower, which occasion'd the discourse we have now been confidering, he feem'd to wonder at their ignorance, and faid, Know ye not this parable +? And again, when they asked him the meaning of another of his parables, Are ye also yet without understanding ‡? By which he intimated, that it was not so much the obscurity of the parables themselves, as their own dulness, and want of thought, that made them not perceive the import of his doctrine.

IT will be asked however, whether, allowing the books of the New Testament,

^{*} Matth. 13. 13, 14, 15. + Mark 4. 13.

[‡] Mat. 15. 1c.

notwithstanding the figurative, parabolical, and proverbial ways of expression with which they abound, to have been plain and intelligible in the age when they were first written; their meaning be not very obscure and uncertain, especially to the common people, in these remote times; when such forms of fpeaking are strange and unufual? And consequently, whether they are not very improper to be recommended as a standing rule of religion and morality, fince 'tis likely they will lead the people into great mistakes, even about the perfections and providence of God; and the moral directions contain'd in them are so dark and confus'd? Undoubtedly all this must be allow'd, if the scheme which the author of Christianity &c. proceeds upon be true, viz. that the common people are to make no use of their reason in interpreting the facred writings, but to be govern'd intirely by founds. But what need of fuch a supposition? Do the advocates for revelation affert and maintain this? On the contrary, is it not granted by all, that it is the sense of these authors, and not their words barely, that we are concern'd about? And should not the same care be taken in order to understand their meaning, as is neceffary with a respect to other writers?

'T WILL be sufficient therefore to my prefent purpose to shew, that the books of the New Testament are so plain, as, in all ages,

to answer the great defign, for which, if they are a divine revelation, they must have been originally intended; —— that the common people, if they will think, and make any use at all of their reason, may easily learn from them all the effential doctrines of the Christian religion; that notwithstanding the peculiar style and manner in which they are written, they are calculated to give them the justest notions of God, and a plain, as well as perfect rule of morality, inforc'd by the most rational, and powerful motives; - that 'tis not the natural consequence of their using figures, parables, allegories, and the like, if any fall into errors about important principles of religion and virtue, because there is a sufficient guard against all such abuses to every common reader, but owing to accidents which, in the present state of the world, are unavoidable, let the rule of action be upon the whole ever so plain; and that what difficulties there are, as it must be own'd there will be difficulties after all, are fuch as the bulk of mankind need not much concern themselves with, in order to answer the wife and gracious intention of God in communicating the Christian revelation. And in order to shew that this is really the case, I have feveral things briefly to offer. Let it be observed therefore.

3. THAT figurative, allegorical, proverbial expressions, &c. do not necessarily render P 2 the

the meaning of a book, even in those very passages, obscure, and hard to be understood. For in parables, and allegories, the general defign and drift of the writer, and the main point he had in view may be clear and obvious to every one, that reads him with the leaft attention. And 'tis not unreasonable to suppose, that our Saviour's parables, in particular, may be more intelligible to the common people now, than to those to whom they were first deliver'd; because they have bis own explications of some of them; and others, those, for instance, which represented the then future swift and extensive progress of the gospel among the Gentiles, may be much plainer fince that wonderful event happen'd, to which they are so easily accommodated, than they were to the body of the Yews, whose notions and prejudices in this particular point darken'd their understandings in fome measure, and hinder'd them from apprehending, fo foon as they might otherwise, the true intent and meaning of them.

And all that can be inferr'd from the use of figurative expressions in the new Testament is, that these books are not always to be taken literally. But what then? May it not be plain, when figurative ways of speaking are us'd, that they are figurative? And may not the sense of them be so obvious, that no reader of the least reslection can mistake

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it? Without doubt it may. Nay, the author of Christianity &c. in his labour'd collection, has given some instances of this kind, and instances, which are, in all reason, too trifling to be urged in so grave and ferious an argument; as that all the kings of the earth fought the presence of Solomon *; that if the things which Jesus did were written, the world itself could not contain the books +. For if, in the room of each of these passages, he could have produced a thousand, it would fignify just nothing; both as they are in themselves of no consequence, and do not in the least affect the general defign of revelation, nor any of its important doctrines; and because the common people must immediately perceive that fuch expressions are figurative (somewhat of a like nature being very usual in languages, which have not, generally, so much of amplification and byperbole) and never were so fupid as to understand them literally. But to come more directly to the main difficulty,

4. Those parts of the new Testament, which are express'd in the most plain and simple manner, give a complete and most rational account of the perfections and providence of God, and a noble scheme of morality; so that the meanest of the people, without concerning themselves at all with figurative and proverbial phrases, allegories,

^{* 2} Chron. 9. 23.

[†] John 21. 5.

parables, and the like, nay, if we suppose that they are not capable of understanding them, have an excellent system of natural religion, recommended upon more certain principles, and inforc'd by stronger motives, than can be found in all the writings of the antient philosophers. And these plain accounts, the sense of which is obvious and easy to all, are a good general explication of all the dark passages, and a sufficient guard against errors of consequence, with respect to any grand point of religion and morality.

IT will fignify but little to fay, that the people actually mistake figures, parables, allegories, &c. and are led into false notions by them. For if explaining dark passages in a book, which, it is generally believed, can contain no contradictions and inconfiftencies, by fuch as are clear and indisputable, be the most natural method of interpreting it; a method which all who think must discern and approve of; and if the common people, provided they follow this method, and make any use of their reason, cannot be misled by the peculiar style and phrase of scripture into unworthy conceptions of God, or mistake the general nature of true religion; all of which is most evident, and undeniable; it necessarily follows, that these books are upon the whole a plain and useful rule, and wisely calculated for the instruction of the bulk of mankind.

THE question is not how they do, but how they might eafily understand them by the common use of their reason; their indolence, carelessness, and prejudice, is not the least objection against the sufficiency of the scripture-rule; because if they will not think for themselves, but refign their understandings and consciences implicitly to the direction and conduct of others, the plainest rule we can possibly conceive of, will be no fecurity against the most absurd and dangerous errors. And accordingly, this is most notorious with respect to reason, which the author of Christianity &c. and all the writers on the same side of the question magnify as a most easy, sure, and infallible guide; that its clearness, universality, and sufficiency to direct in matters of religion, has been no preservative against the most extravagant superstition, and the vilest corruptions of natural religion and morality. If therefore notwithstanding those gross abuses of it, it may, in itself, be a plain and obvious rule, so may revelation.

AND as for what our author objects against the method which I have proposed, for understanding dark passages of scripture, or at least, for preventing the common people from being led into any great mistakes by them, that " if we can't depend on sin-" gle texts; and where there are several, the P 4 " plainest

" plainest are to carry it; the difficulty will " be to know which are the plainest; fince " the different sects of Christians have ever " pretended that the plainest texts are on their " fide; and wonder'd how their adversaries " could mistake their meaning *;" it is saying in effect, that there is no rule, in the nature of things, whereby to distinguish between what is clear, and what is obscure; or else, that be the difference, in itself, ever so discernible, the common people can form no judgment if there are strong and bold pre-tences on both fides, i. e. in truth, want a capacity to discern between confidence and reasoning. I cannot but take notice here, by the way, of the inconfistency of this writer's principles, when he has different points in view; for at sometimes, reason is so plain a guide to the common people, that they need nothing else to teach them the whole of religion, and prevent all mistakes about it; but at other, they are a stupid herd, destitute even of common sense, who can't distinguish between plain and figurative expressions, and are under a kind of necessity of understanding figurative and proverbial ways of speaking, parables, allegories, &c. literally; not only in opposition to the clearest dictates of reajon, but likewise to the most express and positive affertions of revelation itself. This shews, indeed, that such persons have a very

strong inclination to run down reveal'd religion: but makes it doubtful, whether they have any fix'd and uniform set of principles of their own, to offer in the room of it. Again,

5. 'T is very material, and worth observing, that the generality of the common people do not, in fact, misunderstand a great number of the figurative and prover-bial expressions used in scripture; and are not at a loss about the meaning of those precepts, that are deliver'd " after a gene-" ral, undetermin'd, nay, hyperbolical man-" ner;" which shews, that such a way of writing does not, in the nature of the thing itself, hinder, but that these books may, upon the whole, be a plain rule of conduct, fitted for the use of the bulk of mankind. I shall give several instances of this kind both from the Old and New Testament; confining myself chiefly to those passages, which the author of Christianity &c. has heap'd together as great obscurities, and general, confused, nay false accounts of things, if taken strictly and literally.

How few are there among the common people, who interpret those passages according to the letter, which impute bodily parts, buman infirmities, and passions to the Deity *?

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 251.

Scarce one in a thousand. The generality firmly believe, that God is an infinite, invifible spirit; and consequently, that when he is represented as having eyes, ears, bands, and the like; as fitting upon the circle of the earth +; riding upon the wings of the wind |; and moving from place to place to observe the conduct of his creatures; this is only accommodated to our present conceptions, and expressing abstract truths by such ideas as are most familiar to the bulk of mankind; and therefore they take it to denote no more than his knowledge and power, his supreme majesty, universal providence, particular care and direction of events, and narrow inspection of the actions of men. In like manner, when "God is represented for many days " together as visible on Mount Sinai ‡," the people generally understand it, not as if the invisible God himself was seen, but of some external glory, the symbol and manifestation of his presence. And those elegant and lofty descriptions of the divine being, with which, the poetical parts of scripture especially, abound, have a natural tendency to strike not only the vulgar, but more philosophical minds with the most folemn awe and veneration of him; and give the strongest and most elevated fentiments of his power and providence, which are figured with so much pamp and magnificence; and consequently are of excellent use.

† 15a. 40. 22. | Pf. 18. 10. | Page 252. AGAIN,

AGAIN, ask the people whether repentance can properly be attributed to God, and they will answer almost universally, that he is not a man that he should repent; and therefore, when repentance is ascribed to him in the Old Testament, they do not understand it as if he had a different judgment of things, or was forry for any part of his conduct (and indeed cannot naturally, if they don't confult their reason at all, take this to be the sense of the revelation, because there are other passages that absolutely deny it *) but as a figurative expression denoting, that, in some particular cases, he acted like a person who really repented. Thus, with respect to an instance which is mention'd by the author of Christianity ‡ &c. when God was highly displeased with the abominable corruptions and wickedness of mankind, he did, as far as was confistent with his perfect wisdom, unmake them again by caufing a general deluge, and destroying the whole human race, eight perfons only excepted, who were faved to stock the world a-new with inhabitants; and in this acted as if he had repented of baving made man on the earth +. Again, when he put by Saul's family from fucceeding to the crown of Israel after his decease, and commanded the prophet Samuel to anoint David in his life-time; he acted as if he repented

^{*} Numb. 23. 19. 1 Sam. 15. 29. Rom. 11. 24. ‡ Pag. 251.
‡ Gen. 6. 6.

that be had made Saul king *. And thus likewife, when he is represented as weary of repenting; what can the common people, who generally believe that God can't properly repent, understand by this, but the very thing that was intended, viz. that instead of fulpending, or removing his judgments, which his prevailing inclination to mercy, and defire of the reformation and happiness of a guilty people had inclin'd him to do in times past, as if he repented of the evil threatned; he was now determin'd, having found gentler methods to be ineffectual, and that they were incorrigible offenders, upon their absolute ruin, unless they prevented it by a speedy amendment. This meaning of the phrase must have been so evident that none could mistake it, and consequently it would have appear'd, upon the first reading, to be nothing at all to our author's purpose, if he had only been so ingenuous as to quote the whole sentence, which runs thus; thou hast for saken me, saith the Lord, thou art gone backward: therefore will I stretch out my hand against thee, and destroy thee; I am weary with repenting +.

FARTHER, when God is said to have rested, and to be refresh'd after having finished his work of creation, the common people are not so stupid as to imagine, that

1 Sam. 15. 11.

† Fer. 15. 6.

he was so fatigued by hard labour as to need proper refreshment; but the easy and obvious idea convey'd to ALL by this expression is, "that in fix days God ended the creation of the world, and was pleased with what his omnipotence had effected, as answering exactly the model that was design'd by his infinite wisdom and goodness."

THE same may be said as to other pasfages. For inflance, when it is affirm'd, that God did things to try people; the vulgar, in general, know as well as this author, that a being, whom revelation in the most distinct and express terms, as well as reason, declares to be omniscient, could not do it for bis own information, but that the persons try'd might have an opportunity to give an unexceptionable, and noble proof of their virtue and integrity; which would be attended with very great advantages with respect to themselves, by affording them a stronger assurance of their fincerity, and consequently the most folid satisfaction in a review of their conduct, and as it is the necessary tendency of difficult and beroic acts of virtue especially, to strengthen very much the inward principles and habits of virtue; and besides it might be of fingular use, as a standing example, to animate and encourage others.

AGAIN, can it be supposed that any of the people, when God is said to swear in wrath,

wrath*, imagine that he took a rash oath. and sware in a passion? Must they not be convinc'd from the books of the Old and New Testament themselves, as well as by the reason of their minds, that this is impossible? The general conception that they form of it is, I make no doubt, that being justly difpleased with the perverse and ungrateful behaviour of the Israelites, in the wilderness, and the many repeated affronts they had offer'd him, he declar'd in the most folemn manner, that, unless they repented, they should not enter into his rest +. Add to this, that the meanest of the people universally include in their notion of God, that he is the supreme being; and consequently, when they read of his fwearing, are not in the least danger of taking in the common idea of an oath, viz. an invocation of, and appeal to a superior. And why should the author of Christianity &c. mention this, when he knows it is not what the scripture means, when God is at any time faid to fwear? The real fense of scripture is certainly very intelligible, and rational; for the form of what it calls God's oath is, as I live faith the Lord t, i.e. as fure as I exist such and such things are true, or shall come to pass. Now what exception is there in reason against this? or must we amuse the world with idle cavils

Chr flianity &c. p. 250.

† Pf. 95. 11.

about the propriety of words, when the thing intended by them is eafily, and universally understood, and intirely just and defensible? In this writer's notion of an oath, 'tis undoubtedly true that God cannot fwear; and 'tis as undeniable, that there is not a fingle passage, either in the Old or New Testament, that so much as intimates he ever did; such objections therefore are trifling with mankind in the groffest manner, and a much greater discredit to the persons that make them, than to the scriptures against which they are urged. For the whole of what is faid amounts only to this, that an idea is fix'd to a word, which the author of Christianity &c. does not think proper; i.e. which is not the usual acceptation of it now, tho it might be very commonly used this way by the age when these books were first written (who, as words are arbitrary, had certainly a right, by general consent, to fix what meaning to them they pleas'd;) but it cannot be pretended, that any real inconvenience could follow from it, because the sense of the word is so clearly determin'd, that none in that age, nor in any age of the world fince, could possibly mistake it.

In like manner, when God is said "to "bis; and in one place to his for a fly "that is in the uttermost part of the river "of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the "land

" land of Affyria *," there are scarce any of the common people that can be supposed to understand it literally; nor was there the least likelihood that they would, either in the age when these writings were composed, such strong poetical figures being then very common and familiar; or afterwards, the scriptures themselves, if they confine their inquiries there, giving the most exalted conceptions of the Deity, that human reason can form. On the contrary, the general sense of this passage is so very obvious, that even a superficial reader can hardly miss of it (tho he may not perceive the aptness, and beauty of the allusion) viz. that the meanest creatures are subject to God's command; and that he makes use of them as the instruments of his wife and righteous providence, to bring desolation on a finful and degenerate people.

'Tis a mistake to imagine, that the strict and literal sense is always the most obvious, even to the vulgar. For when such actions are attributed to the supreme being, as are inconsistent with those plain accounts of his nature and perfections, which revelation always inculcates, as well as with the notions that reason suggests; the literal sense is evidently unnatural. If therefore when God is said to his, none, who are not quite destitute of all resection, can take it to be literally

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 252. If. 7. 18.

true; and if the thing intended by it be so plain, that all must immediately perceive it; what ill consequence can possibly follow from the use of such a figurative expression? Tis most certain, that in this passage of Isaiah, it is so far from having a tendency to mislead the generality of readers into false and degrading thoughts of God; that in its most natural sense, a sense which it is not conceivable one in ten thousand will mistake, it gives them a very strong and lively idea of his universal dominion, and providence.

Bu T if the author of Christianity &c. defign'd to burlesque the phrase itself, as well as to represent it as very obscure to the common people, and likely to lead them into low and unworthy conceptions of the Deity; which feems indeed to have been his intention by his manner of introducing it; I think, to speak modestly, that he has not shewn any great judgment, or skill in criticism. For besides that the general and obvious sense of it, which the people cannot well mistake, is just and rational; the metaphor itself, by which it is express'd, is exceedingly pertinent and beautiful, intimating the universal command of the great creator, by his speaking to the lowest rank of creatures, as it were, in their own language; so that they as readily follow him as their leader, as beings of an higher order, who are directed by an intelligent and rational principle, and are always

always prepar'd to obey his fummons, and execute the great defigns of his providence. And was I to put an author into a method to make himself completely ridiculous, I would advise him to write a critic in the same manner upon Milton's paradise lost, as is frequently practis'd with respect to poetical pas-Sages of the Old Testament; in which he would have an opportunity of shewing his little wit, by finding fault with feveral things even in this great poet's descriptions of the Deity, which cannot be literally true; but have been admir'd, however, by the greatest genius's of the present age, both for the sublimity of the sentiment, and the elegance and grandeur of the figuring. In the mean time 'tis a most undeniable truth, that 'tis really as abjurd to censure beauties and elegancies in the facred writings, as in any common authors how much foever applauded, and celebrated; tho, thro' the partiality of the age, it may not meet with equal discouragement. For mean and spiteful criticisms are, in themfelves, never the less contemptible for being suffered to pass in the world, and because they are not actually received with that contempt they deserve.

AGAIN, our author has thrown together feveral texts of scripture to prove Moses to be a God; nay, the Lord God of the Israelites; in order "to shew (as he says) how little "we

"we are to depend on words and phrases;"
i.e. to shew what nobody denies, that we
are not always to understand them literally.
But does this writer really believe, that any
of the meanest of the people ever were, or
ever could be induc'd to think, if there had
been twice as many texts of the same kind,
that Moses was "the eternal omnipotent
"God, the maker of heaven and earth;
"who, by his own immediate power, per"formed all the wonders in Egypt, and
"brought the Israelites out from thence?"

IF, when figurative expressions are used, they will necessarily be understood by All (as in the present case) as figurative, they can do no hurt, even tho their precise meaning be unintelligible to the bulk of mankind. Let us suppose therefore, that the common people are not likely to find out the true sense of those texts; what will be the consequence of fuch a supposition? Will it follow, that the books in which fuch passages are found, are of no authority? or that they may not, notwithstanding, be upon the whole, a plain and useful rule of religion and morality? Not in the least. For let the number of mere unintelligibles (by which I mean fuch things, as very many of the common people, in every age, are not likely thoroughly to understand) be much greater than, I believe, it really is; if the books of the Old and New Testament

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 331.

give a plain and rational account of the perfections and providence of God, and a good general scheme of religion supported upon the best principles, and by stronger motives than mere reason can suggest; if this account may be understood, whether the defign of figures, parables, &c. be feen or not; if there be a sufficient guard, in the books themselves, against all errors dishonourable to God, or injurious to the practice of true piety and virtue; and the common people cannot fall into mistakes of this kind, if they make any use of their reason, and follow the natural and easy method of explaining dark and figurative passages by such as are clear and determinate; they are certainly of very great advantage as a standing rule, and fitted for general instruction and use.

I HAVE hitherto put the worst supposition that can be made, viz. that a great part of the people, in these remote times, are not likely to understand the meaning of those texts relating to Moses, and shewn, that no ill consequence can follow from it, because they never did, and 'tis utterly improbable they ever will put that absurd sense upon them, which our author infinuates; but, in reality, these passages have nothing of difficulty or obscurity in them, but are very plain and intelligible to every common reader. Thus, for instance, when we consider Moses as speaking in the name of God, there

there is not the least barshness or impropriety in his promising rain in due season to fuch as kept his commandments *; and to Joshua, that he would be with him in carrying the people into Canaan +; or, in his faying, that he did great works, yea, miracles in the fight of the Israelites, on purpose that they might know that he was the Lord their God ‡. Again, when the Lord said to him, see, I have made thee a God to Pharaoh, and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet **; the obvious meaning of the text, which immediately occurs to ALL, is, that God deputed him to act in his name, and give forth his commands, and appointed Aaron, because he was the better speaker, to be his messenger and mouth to Pharaoh: and therefore 'tis expresly said in another place, and may serve for a full explication of the passage we are now confidering, that Aaron should be to him instead of a mouth, and he to Aaron inflead of God +. Farther, as God imploy'd Moses in bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt, the same work might very justly, and according to forms of speaking that are common in all languages, be attributed to both; to God as the principal and immediate author of their deliverance, and to Moses as his instrument. As he was the messenger and prophet of God, and gave sufficient credentials of a divine commission, 'twas fit and

^{*} Deut. 11. 13, 14, 15, &c. † Deut. 31. 23. ‡ Deut. 29. 5,6. ** Exod. 7. 1. †† Exod. 4. 14.—17. Q. 3

necessary that the people should acknowledge him under that character; and believe in bim, as well as in God that sent him. And the phrase being baptized into, or into the name of any person, as it is explained by St. Paul in that very epistle, in which he says, figuratively and allusively only, that the Israelites were baptized into Moses *, implies no more than this; that by the ceremony of baptism we give ourselves up to his conduct, as one authoriz'd and appointed by God to be our leader; declare that we are his disciples, and make a public profession of that religion which God sent him to publish †.

AND whereas it is faid, that " Moses is " pray'd to, under the appellation of Lord, " to forgive sin;" the true state of the case is this. In one of the passages referred to, we are told, that God being displeas'd with Aaron and Miriam for speaking against Moses, smote Miriam with a leprofy: upon which Aaron, in a submisfive manner, begg'd of Mojes to forgive the offence they had committed against him, as the person appointed by God to be their commander and leader (which was but a point of justice, and a necessary reparation of the injury he had done him,) and believing that Miriam's cure depended on his prayer to God for her, defired him to intercede in her behalf. These words, Alas, my Lord, I be-

feech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned *, can't possibly mean any thing else, in their first, and most obvious sense, considering the character of the person who supplicates, and the notion he must necessarily have of him to whom he petitions; and no prejudice can pervert so plain a passage, but what would obscure and darken every thing; especially if we add what immediately sollows, that Moses, instead of pretending to do any thing by an authority and power inherent in himself, cried unto the Lord, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee. Let her not be as one dead †.

The other text I need but just set before the reader to shew, that 'tis intirely impertinent; Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron, and said, I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Now therefore forgive, I pray thee, my sin, only this once; and entreat the Lord your God, that he may take away from me this death only ‡, What cavilling is here about the words sin, and forgiveness? I cannot but think, that the author of Christianity &c. has, in this affair, sinn'd against all rules of decency, and ought to pray to be forgiven; or, in other words, to ask pardon of the world, for this

† Numb. 12. 13.

^{*} Numb. 12. 11. ‡ Exod. 10. 16, 17.

extravagant trifling with the common sense of mankind.

IF it be said, that texts of this nature have been actually urg'd to prove the same point, in one of the most considerable controversies among Christians: I answer, that I am as free to condemn that use of them there, as here; but this is nothing towards proving the main point, the obscurity of scripture in itself. Nay, the quite contrary may rather be inferr'd from it. For as the very same sort of texts are universally, and immediately understood when they relate to Moses; the reason why they are misapply'd, in any other case, can't be the obscurity of the texts themselves, but it must be owing to some accidental prejudice,

Let us now consider briefly some of the texts of the New Testament, which the author of Christianity &c. fansies to be very obscure and confus'd; and we shall find, that compared with other passages in which the same things are more largely explain'd, and with the general tenor of the Christan revelation, they have a natural and easy sense that can't well be mistaken. The main of what he has advanc'd upon this head is, really, finding fault with the language in which the New Testament was written, for being different from the genius of modern languages; and indeed, 'tis very easy to talk in general about figures,

that render the design of these old books very dissipult and uncertain; but if it be sound, that even those passages, which are urg'd as the strongest proofs of their obscurity, are almost universally understood in their just and proper sense, what will become of all this shew of reasoning? It will appear to be only starting imaginary difficulties, and amusing ourselves with empty speculations against sact and experience. For if particular texts are very seldom mistaken by the meanest of the people, this is the most convincing argument in the world, that they are, in themselves, sufficiently clear and intelligible.

Now thus the case stands most evidently, with respect to the greatest part of those texts, the meaning of which our author has laboured to prove to be intricate and perplex'd to the common people; the true state of the case, I say, is quite contrary to what he has represented it, viz. that they are generally and thoroughly understood. Where is the man who supposes, that when our Saviour says, Think not I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace but a sword*, his words are to be interpreted strictly; as if it was the direct design of his mission to put the world in a slame, and to promote and incourage contention and va-

riance amongst mankind, and the dreadful guilt and miseries of war? Nay, who that knows any thing of the mild, benevolent, and amiable temper which the Christian religion inspires, can possibly entertain such a thought as this? On the contrary, confult the lowest of the vulgar who think at all about it, and you will find that the fense of this passage is univerfally agreed upon among them, and they will all concur in some such paraphrase of it as this: " Do not expect that I shall " be quietly own'd and fubmitted to, or " that my religion will be readily and peace-" ably embrac'd, for if you do, the event " will defeat and disappoint your expectati-" ons; tho I was fent to refine and civilize " mankind, and root out of their nature " all fowre, unfociable and mischievous passions, " and to make them gentle, affable and con-" descending in their behaviour, yet, thro' " the prevailing degeneracy and corruption " of the world, I shall prove the occasion " of strife and discord, of unnatural heats " and animofities, of violent batreds and " bloody massacres, and men will, upon the " account of my religion, break thro' the " bonds of nature, and the strongest ties of " humanity; as if indeed the very end of my " coming was, not to give peace, but rather " division *; to set a man at variance against

^{*} Luke 12, 51.

" his father, and the daughter against her mo-

" ther, and the daughter-in-law against her

" mother-in-law +."

AGAIN, when it is faid, if any man come to me, and bate not his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and fifters; yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple*; the sense of this text is never the less obvious, because the expressions us'd in it are figurative. And accordingly, none of the most ignorant of the common people ever understand it literally, (their constant practice, even while they profess to have the hope of good christians, is an evident demonstration of the contrary) but only of a comparative hatred; i. e. in other words, that they are oblig'd to forfake their dearest friends and relatives, and facrifice their most valuable worldly interests, nay life itself, rather than renounce christianity, or do any thing inconfistent with the obligations of their religion and conscience; which is the very explication that Christ himself has given of it, in other parallel passages. He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, i. e. who is not always prepar'd to fuffer, whenever he is called to it,

[†] Matt. 10. 35.

^{*} Luke 14. 26.

in defence of my religion, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life, shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall findit +. And there is no man that bath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an bundred fold now in this time, bouses, and brethren and fifters, and mother, and children, and lands, with persecutions; i. e. in a sense of his Integrity, of the greatness of his mind and his manly beroic behaviour, he shall enjoy such inward satisfaction, and such pleasing views of the approbation and favour of the supreme governour of the world, as must make even a state of persecution vastly preferable to the best accommodations and pleasures of outward life, when secur'd by a base and cowardly betraying the interests of truth and virtue; and in the world to come eternal life *.

The same is true as to the following texts, which are mentioned likewise as very obscurely and inaccurately express'd, viz. that the sense of them is easily, and almost universally understood. Blessed be ye poor ‡, is never taken absolutely; but interpreted of the poor in spirit, or such as have an humble mind, and moderate desires suited to their circumstances, and are contented with

* Mar, 10, 29, 30.

[†] Matt. 10. 37, 38, 39. ‡ Luke 6. 20.

that condition in which providence has plac'd them. Bleffed are ye that bunger *, of them that hunger after righteousness. Woe unto ye rich +, of fuch persons only who trust, or repose their ultimate happiness in riches, and do not lay out their wealth in acts of beneficence and liberality. Bleffed are they that mourn ‡, blessed are ye that weep **, not of afflicted and disconsolate in general; but of penitent mourners for fin, and those who have a tender and compassionate sense of the forrows and miseries of their fellow-creatures. And on the contrary, Woe unto you that laugh now ++, is not interpreted as condemning a chearful sprightly temper, or innocent recreation; but of the vain, the impertinently gay, the voluptuous, who make pleafure their business; unmindful of the great concern of life, and utter strangers to those grave and folid reflections, which so well become rational beings.

So likewise, Take no thought for the morrow ‡‡, is never understood to exclude a prudent care to provide a comfortable subsistence; or such a wise and cautious management of worldly affairs, as is most likely to enable men, both to support themselves and their families decently and honourably at present, and to lay a foundation for lasting plenty and happiness, and guard against fu-

^{*} Ver. 21. † Ver. 24. ‡ Matt, 5. 4. ** Ib. ver. 25:

and anxious concern about futurity, which makes them fulpicious and desponding, destroys their relish of present pleasures, and torments them with imaginary evils, and argues besides great distrust of the wisdom and goodness of providence; which, as it has made provision for the constant support of the animal and vegetable world, can't be supposed to have neglected furnishing proper accommodations for the rational, vastly the most noble part of the creation, and to have left them alone expos'd to necessary want and misery.

AND how very few, comparatively, are they, who understand these sayings literally, He that taketh away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also *; and resist not evil, but whofoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also +; how exceeding few, I fay, are they, in comparison, who have interpreted these texts with so rigorous a strictness, as to think all self-defence, and guarding their property unlawful? The expressions here us'd are proverbial, and in this view the bulk of the people have always confider'd them, and put this general most useful sense upon them, " that instead of indulging a " revengeful humour, and returning evil for " evil, they ought rather to recede from

^{*} Matt. 5. 40.

"their right in little matters, and put up "fmall affronts, as being the most likely way, "upon the whole, to preserve the peace of fociety, and prevent the increase of contention and disorder; whereas the insisting upon full satisfaction for every trisling injury, whether real or imaginary, and being intent upon a strict retaliation, has a natural tendency to irritate and instance, "more and more, the passions of both the parties at variance, and make differences and animosities perpetual."

ONCE more, Sell what ye have, and give alms *, is generally taken just as it was intended, not as a rule for all ages; but as peculiar to the first times of Christianity. And even then it was not properly a precept, as the author of Christianity &c. styles it, not a law of universal, and indispensable obligation; but only an exhortation to a thing that was thought expedient in a particular circumstance. Nay the custom itself was far from being general: for we find in all the epistles to Gentile converts, and even to the dispers'd Jews, the usual distinctions of rich and poor mention'd, without the least mark of dislike, or censure. It seems to me, that this use prevail'd chiefly, if not only in the land of Judea; and very probably, for a reason peculiar to the state of that coun-

^{*} Luke 12. 33.

try and people. For as Christ and his Apofles knew, that the Yews would in a little time be destroy'd, and that then their property would be ravish'd from them, and their possessions become a prey to the injustice and violence of their victorious oppressors; they might, with reason, think it more adviseable, that they should be imploy'd for the general good of Christians, and the relief and support of their necessitous and suffering brethren, than fall into the hands of common plunderers, and minister to their riot, and luxury. ever this is certain, that, even in Jerusalem, a community of goods was not absolutely infisted on; for in the case of Ananias St. Peter expresly says, that while his land remain'd unfold it was his own; and after it was fold, it was in his own power (free from any obligation, divine or buman, to make it a common flock) and he might have done with it whatever he thought fit. In all these passages 'tis plain that the sense of scripture is very obvious, and generally understood by common Christians. And indeed, I can't see how they should be led to understand any of them strictly, and absolutely, not only if they make use of their reason to direct their inquiries; but if they interpret the New Testament by itself, and take the explications there given them; which it is so far from needing any great pains and labour to find out, that they will almost necessarily occur to every ordinary reader.

TwouLD.

'Twould be endless to follow our author thro' all his fancied difficulties, and obscurities; however, I shall add an instance or two farther. " Things commanded (he " fays) are faid positively not to be com" manded; as, I spake not to your fathers, " nor commanded them in that day I brought " them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. *" But for the very reason here given, viz: because " things commanded are faid not to be " commanded," 'tis scaree possible that any should mistake the sense of the place, and interpret it literally. Let us take the matter in this view. This very writer is suppos'd, by the author of Christianity &c. himself, to believe, that burnt offerings and facrifices were commanded by God; 'tis therefore a mere jest to imagine, that he could be guilty of fuch a glaring contradiction and inconfistency as to deny this, and it will never enter into the imagination of any reader. So that there is not the least difficulty in this passage, but taking the whole of it in connection, its meaning is as obvious as any thing can be; I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them, &c. concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices; but this thing commanded I them, faying, obey my voice; i. e. the latter, obedience to moral precepts, was what I principally requir'd, and

* Christianity &cc. p. 335. R † Fer. 7. 22.

the former I laid but little stress on in comparison of it; nay, in cases in which they may interfere, and come into competition, I never commanded burnt offerings and sacrifices. Such clear obscurities, and easy difficulties as these we may allow ever so great a number of, without at all lessening the usefulness of the facred writings; and I beg leave myself to add two or three of the same kind, which, I know not why they are omitted, but because 'tis undeniable they are univerfally understood, and a natural key for the interpretation of this, and all other texts to the like purpose. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life *; set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth +; and which is a very exact parallel for the sentiment, as well as the manner of expression, I desired mercy and not sacrifice t, i. e. rather than facrifice; for to this fense we are naturally led by the latter part of the verse, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

Is HALL conclude this head with the words of a late most excellent and learned writer, who, in observing upon "the unbounded manner, in which the general duty of subjection to superiors, in every relative station of life, is express'd; children and servants obey your parents and

* Jo. 6. 27. † Col. 3. 2. ‡ Hof. 6. 6.

Sei A

" masters

" masters in all things *; let wives be sub-" jest to their own busbands in every thing; " fays, + Reason, and the nature of things, " and the general usage of all language, " sheweth, that in these and all other the like " expressions, the phrase in every thing and in " all things, must necessarily be understood to " mean only, in all things just, in all things " lawful, in all things that are honest and fit " to be done. In human writings, these ge-" neral manners of expression, arising from " the known and vulgar use of language, " are never misunderstood: and therefore " to misunderstand them in the facred books " only, is mere perverseness. The gospel nei-" ther inlarges nor diminishes any superior's " power; it neither adds to, nor takes from " any inferior's right. In these cases, it only 's confirms and explains the obligations of " nature; and inforces the practice of the " respective duties, with stronger and more " powerful motives. As therefore in all " other writings, so in scripture likewise; " the true, the natural, and evident meaning " of fuch phrases as these, in all things, in " every thing, and the like; is not what the " word, all, fuggefts in its fingle fignifica-" tion; but what the vulgar sense of it is, in " fuch expressions and sentences. When we " are taught that the commands of God, or the " laws of truth and right, are to be obey'din

*Col. 3. 20, 22.—Tit. 2.4. mons, Vol. III. p. 38—41.

† Dr. Clark's Ser-

" all things; the nature of the thing, not the " force of the fingle words, shews that the " obedience is to be universal and without " exception. In other cases, where the very " fame words are used (as, in the text, Ser-" vants obey your masters in all things;) the " nature of the thing there likewife no less " plainly shews, that this obedience in all " things is to be limited, by its confiftency " with the commands of any Superior master " either on earth or in heaven. In all " language, the fignification of every word " necessarily depends upon the other words " with which it is connected: and where " no controversy is concern'd, nor prejudice " interposes, 'tis always understood, and can-" not but be understood to be so, by all un-" derstandings, and by all capacities equal-" ly, from the highest to the meanest. "When the scripture mentions the everlast-" ing God, 'tis not the force of the word " Everlasting, but the application of it to " the first cause and author of all things, " that makes it denote a true and absolute " eternity: for when the same scripture " mentions the everlasting mountains, 'tis " understood by all men both of the greatest " and of the smallest understandings, that it " there fignifies only fuch a duration, as is " proper to the subject of which it is spoken. " - In the question about transubstantiation, " the writers of the church of Rome al-" ledge with great confidence, that the nat " tural,

" tural, the literal, the first and obvious " sense of the words, This is my body, is " plainly in favour of their fide of the " question. And yet in reality the very " contrary to this, is evidently true. For " the natural, the literal, the first and ob-" vious sense of the phrase, is not that which " arises from the fignification of the word " body fingly, but that which arises from its " natural fignification in fuch an expression, " wherein commemorative bread is affirm'd " to be the body of him who is commemorated " thereby. When a picture is spoken of, as " being the person it represents; the natural, " the literal, the first and obvious sense of the expression, is not that 'tis really, but " that 'tis representatively. When our Lord " fays, I am the true vine; the question is " not what the word, vine, naturally fig-" fies in other cases; but what it there most " naturally and obviously fignifies, when a " teacher calls himself a vine, and his fol-" lowers its branches," In like manner, when a person sent from God to instruct mankind declares, that he that eateth his flesh, and drinketh his blood, bath eternal life*; 'tis the most unnatural thing in the world (and what, we may be fure, none would ever think of but in the beat of dispute, and under such violent prejudices as will pervert and darken even felf-evident

truths) to understand him literally; or to apprehend that he meant any thing more by it, than entertaining and improving his doctrine, which tended to promote purity and virtue, the life and health of the foul; and by that means to prepare men for a happy immortality. Our Saviour has indeed himfelf directly pointed out this sense to us, by faying, The words which I speak unto you they are spirit, and life *; and the figure here us'd is the very same which we find in the book of Proverbs, when wisdom is describ'd as killing her beasts, mingling her wine, and furnishing her table, as sending forth her maidens, and crying upon the highest places of the city, - come eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled; i. e. as it immediately follows, for sake the foolish, and live, and go in the way of under-Randing +.

HAVING proved thus largely, that the people do not in fact mifunderstand a great number of the figurative, and proverbial expressions us'd in scripture; and are not at a loss about the meaning of those precepts, which, according to the author of Christianity &c. " are deliver'd after a general un-" determin'd, nay, hyperbolical manner;" and consequently that such a way of writing does not, in the nature of the thing

* 90.6.63. †

old and New Testament may, upon the whole, be a plain rule of conduct, sitted for general instruction, and use: I shall proceed one step farther, and endeavour to shew,

6. THAT the people might as easily understand those texts, the true meaning of which they misapprehend, and pervert; or, in other words, that following the same rules would as certainly discover the sense of the latter, as it does that of the former; and that there is as plain and full a guard, in the books themselves, against the errors which they fall into, so far as they affect important principles of religion, or moral obligations, (and these are all the errors that it is of any consequence to prevent) as against those which they escape; so that the rule itself is equally clear and intelligible in both cases, and 'tis nothing but mens indolence and prejudice that make the difference, with respect to their understanding the feveral parts of it.

For instance, when bodily parts, and buman infirmities, and passions are ascrib'd to God, I have shewn, that there are very few who take these passages strictly, and literally; not only because the literal sense contradicts those natural notions of the Deity which

reason suggests, but is directly repugnant to plain and express declarations of scripture, that he is an infinite invisible spirit *. And may they not as eafily fee, that God could not in a proper sense, or by an immediate operation and influence on his mind, barden Pharaph's heart; fince this is as evidently contrary to reason, and to the most clear and positive testimony of revelation, that he cannot be tempted with evil, nor tempteth any man +; and especially when it is said to be done only in fuch a way, as is confistent with Pharaoh's hardening his own heart ‡? our Saviour faid of himself, that he came not to fend peace on earth, but a fword **, purely, because his religion would prove the occafion of much confusion and violence in the world, quite contrary to its defign, and natural and most manifest tendency; so God is faid to have bardened Pharaoh's beart, because his removing his judgments, and suffering the Magicians to perform, for a time, the same miracles that Moses and Aaron did, was the occasion of his bardening his own This is the account given in the history itself ++; and nothing can be more plain both from the relation we have of the fact, and the general doctrine of revelation, than that this dreadful effect was not, and could not be owing to an absolute decree

^{*} Jo. 4. 24. 1 Tim. 6. 16. † Jam. 1. 13. † Ex. 7. 22.

of God that he should not repent, or to any positive and efficacious influence upon his mind, but solely to his own obstinacy and wickedness.

AGAIN, those texts that speak of God as repenting, are scarce ever interpreted in the common and usual sense of the word, because it is immediately perceiv'd to be abjurd and irrational; but chiefly, because there are other passages which represent it as a thing impossible, that he should strictly and properly repent. Must we not wonder then, how any can possibly be induc'd to believe by the mere found of two or three texts, which, in their most natural and obvious construction, have a quite different meaning, that the Allperfect governour of the world is an arbitrary, tyrannical being, who, for the oftentation of his uncontroulable sovereignty, has abfolutely determin'd the final and eternal mifery of great numbers of his rational creatures? Must we not wonder, I say, how any can be prevail'd upon to believe this, in direct opposition to what the light of 'nature teaches concerning his universal and unlimited goodness; and to the plainest testimonies of scripture, that he is good to all, and bis tender mercies are over all his works *; that he bath no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that he turn from his way and live +;

^{*} Pf. 145. 2.

is willing all men should be saved *; and so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that who soever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world thro' him might be sav'd +?

AND to mention but one passage more: Is it not as easy and natural for the meanest of the people to understand these words, Jacob have I lov'd, and Esau have I hated ! only comparatively; or of God's giving the preference to the one above the other; as to take the fame expression thus (which they do universally) when our Saviour speaks of bating father and mother, wife and children **, &c? And is it not most evident besides from the book of Malachi, from whence the text is cited by St. Paul, that it relates not directly to Jacob and Esau perfonally; but to their descendants the Fews, and Edomites; and only to the distinction made between these two nations, in the course of God's providence, with respect to their temporal prosperity, and outward privileges? I have loved you, saith the Lord; yet ye say, wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother, faith the Lord? yet I loved Jacob, and took his posterity under my spe-

^{* 1} Tim. 2. 4. † Jo. 3. 16. 17. ‡ Rom. 9. 13. ** Luke 14. 10.

cial protection and care; and I hated Esau, and laid his mountains, and his heritage waste *.

I MIGHT add feveral other instances to prove the same point, viz. that the true doctrine of revelation is as plain in cases where it is mistaken, as in others, in which it is generally understood; but these may suffice as a specimen. Some texts are rightly interpreted, others grosly perverted; but there are the very fame belps and advantages for understanding the latter, as the former; and the same guards against absurd and erroneous senses; the natural consequence of which is, that the rule itself is equally clear and intelligible with respect to both; and that the true reason why men think justly on the one, and not on the other is, because in the one inquiry they proceed impartially, and, being under no byass, take the first and most obvious sense of scripture; whereas in the other they are negligent and careless, or else their judgment is already determin'd in favour of some party-scheme.

'T is a very fallacious way of reasoning, to suppose those texts only to be clear, which are universally understood, and those to be very obscure, especially if there be any thing figurative in the expressions, that are by

^{*} Mal. 1. 2, 3.

great numbers misinterpreted: for as the texts which are generally understood, would have been never the less plain in themselves, if they had been commonly mistaken; so the other, would not have been, at all, the more plain, if they had happen'd to be understood. The understanding any rule does not depend more on the clearness of the rule itself, than on the diligence, bonesty, and unprejudic'd temper of those who are to be guided by it. So that 'tis of no moment in the present debate, that men, " by inter-" preting texts literally, have run into " monstrous absurdities *." For, under the influence of enthufiastic delusions and prejudices, they have abus'd full as monstrously the religion of nature. Reason itself has made but a forry figure as a guide, when it has been overwhelm'd by ignorance, and fuperstition. In like manner, it must be own'd, that revelation has been very much darken'd by mysterious comments, and straining fingle texts to countenance establish'd opinions, and support the jargon of school-divinity; and when the people take it for granted, that this is the religion of the Bible, all they have to do, is, in the best manner they can, to accommodate scripture to it. But this is not at all the question; the only point in controversy is, whether the Christian revelation, however it is in fact understood, be

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 339.

Christian revelation defended. 253 not in itself, in all matters of real impor-

tance, an easy and intelligible rule?

AND what has been already faid, I think, is fufficient to evince this. For those parts of the New Testament, which are express'd in the most plain and simple manner, give a complete, and most rational account of the perfections and providence of God, and a noble scheme of morality; so that the meanest of the people, without concerning themselves at all with figurative, and proverbial phrases, allegories, parables, &c. nay, if we suppose that they are not capable of understanding them; have an excellent system of natural religion, recommended upon more certain principles, and enforced by stronger motives, than mere reason ever did, or perhaps can suggest. And those plain accounts, the fense of which is easy and obvious to all, are a good general explication of all the dark 'Tis evident farther, that the literal sense, in many cases, is not the most plain even to the vulgar; but on the contrary must appear strain'd, and unnatural. And accordingly it has been shewn, that they, almost universally, agree in the right sense of a great number of passages, which are express'd after a general, undetermin'd, and figurative manner; and might as eafily understand others which they misrepresent and pervert; and that there is a fufficient guard, in the writings themselves, against all errors

grand points of religion and morality: for that if the people will but make a common use of their reason, and follow the natural, and easy method of interpreting dark passages by such as are clear and determinate; they are in no danger of being misled, by the peculiar style and phrase of scripture, into unworthy conceptions of God, or of mistaking the general nature of true religion.

AND allowing, what is a necessary consequence from these premises, that Christianity is plain in all its practical doctrines, and as a moral rule, which, without doubt, must be the chief defign of any revelation, and not to amuse the world with abstract controversies; other obscurities about antient customs, manners, sects, philosophy, &c. nay, about any points merely speculative, fignify just nothing. For as God never would have given a revelation, if the errors of the world had not been of a practical nature, but confifted only in absurd theories; so differences about fuch things may always continue, and yet all the ends and uses of the Christian revelation, as a standing rule, be completely answered. I might rest the matter here, but can't forbear remarking once more,

^{7.} THAT the author of Christianity &c. represents some texts quite contrary to their manifest design; and others as obscurities and impro-

improprieties, which, taken in their frietest fense, are most plain and rational accounts of things, nay, real beauties, and excellencies, in the moral scheme of revelation. For instance, he tells us, that " the Jewish rites " and facrifices are, in the Old Testament, " absolutely condemn'd, as an iniquity, and " an abomination to the Lord, which were " only fo conditionally *." And indeed, in the place which he refers to, these words are to be found; but any one that reads the whole paragraph must immediately see, that they are not describ'd as iniquity, and an abomination abfolutely, and in themselves; but the particular reason is expresly affign'd, viz. the wickedness and immorality of the worshippers, and their thinking to be acceptable to the Supreme Being for fuch external services, while they were guilty of the worst of vices; Your hands are full of blood +. This method of picking little scraps out of a connected difcourse, by which means the most moral authors may be made to talk impiously, and the gravest, and most judicious, ludicrously, and ridiculously, is utterly inexcusable in one that sets up for a critic; and the more so, when criticisms are design'd to point out the defects of writings, and lessen their reputation; of writings which are of the greatest importance, and generally in the highest esteem. For, be it either a careless, or wilful mistake, 'tis not

^{*} Page 235.

only an injury to the authors, but an affront and imposition upon the world.

AGAIN: our author mentions among his difficulties this text, prove all things; as if he was afraid that it would be taken, in its literal meaning, to be an exhortation to demonstrate, and judge of mathematical propositions, and abstract metaphysical truths; whereas 'tis only part of a fentence, the whole of which, in the judgment of all that read it, must necessarily be confin'd to religion, and morality. And the natural fense of it is, that Christians should believe nothing implicitly, but use their understandings to judge of the nature and consequences of all things that are recommended to them as divine truths, and of their evidence; and when they have form'd their judgment upon mature reflection and examination, hold fast that which is good, i. e. adhere inflexibly to what they apprehend to be right and fit; and abstain from all appearance of evil*. And certainly in this view, which is the view in which it is always confider'd, 'tis a most excellent piece of advice, useful for all mankind, and in all ages; and I am furpriz'd to find it objected against by one, who is so great a friend to free inquiry, and would be as likely as any man to quote, and use it himfelf, upon other occasions, as an express declaration against bigotry, and implicit faith.

^{* 1} Theff. 5. 21, 22.

And must it not be very strange to find it urg'd as an impropiety, and great difficulty, that, "persuasion is call'd compulsion, as, "compel them to come in *," by one, who writes in a language in which no expressions are more common, than "the force of elo-"quence, the force of persuasion, the force of example, the force of importunity," and the like? The best way of answering such objections would be to pass them over in silence, were it not to shew the world what little things are rak'd together in order to render Christianity useless; things, which, in any other argument, I am persuaded, would be thought below censure.

But let us consider what he says upon other passages. Why God's permitting evil, is called doing it: Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it †? Nay, the Lord is said to have created evil ‡. And here I suppose likewise he takes the phrase creating evil to signify no more than the permission of it. If so, he has not, in my opinion, a just notion of the sense of the texts, nor of the concern of providence in this affair. For the evil spoken of, in both these passages, is evidently what we call natural evil only. Now a great deal of this may properly, and strictly be said to be of God's appointing, or

P. 335, Luke 14. 23. † Amos 3. 6. ‡ 1f. 45.7.

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creating, because it necessarily results from the original frame and constitution of things. And even when beings who act freely are the voluntary instruments of pain, and misery to each other, it must be consider'd, that this is one law by which God governs the world, that free agents shall, at least in all common cases, be left to the full exercise of their natural liberty; and besides, the permission of these evils is not the indolence and carelesness of one, who is unconcern'd about the state of the universe, and the course of human affairs; but must be look'd on in this view, viz. as his fuffering things to go on in fuch or fuch a particular channel, because it is upon the whole wife and fit, and agrees with the general scheme of his providence.

AGAIN: when St. Peter says, that, by the gospel, are given unto us exceeding great and precious pronises, that by them we might be partakers of the divine nature*; does our author imagine, that any will think we are capable of being partakers of the necessary eternity, and immensity of God? Is not the most obvious, and only intelligible sense of the phrase, that we may resemble him in his moral attributes; or, which is the frequent acceptation of the Greek word, and a very common use of the word nature in our own language, be of a God-like temper and disposition? And is not

this the noblest end that rational beings can propose, and consequently the bighest that any revelation can pursue? And the same may be faid of our Saviour's exhortation to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect *: when taken generally, it can fignify no more in its first, and most natural meaning, than " imitate the moral perfections of God;" and is never understood otherwise. But indeed the strict sense of it, as it is the conclufion of a discourse upon that particular subject, is, that we should practise the most generous, disinterested, and perfect degree of charity, and mercy, even good-will and beneficence to our enemies, after the example of our heavenly Father, and that we may be his children, who maketh his sun to rise on the evil, and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just, and on the unjust +. And therefore 'tis express'd by St. Luke thus, Be ye merciful, as your Father also is merciful ‡.

But this leads me to confider what our author has faid with relation to the precepts of forgiving injuries, and loving enemies, which have always been thought very great excellencies in the Christian scheme; and will still appear to be so, notwithstanding the objections he has made to them, which are, in reality, very slight and inconsiderable. He expresses his opinion about this matter in gene-

* Mut. 5: 48. † Mat. 5. 45. ‡ Luke 6. 36.

ral, in the words of Celfus, that "the doctrine " of forgiving injuries, was not peculiar to the " Christians, tho they taught it after a grosser " manner "." And why? Because the command is given in a general, indefinite way; whereas there are certain necessary restrictions, and limitations, without which it would be attended with fatal confequences. It must be "interpreted consistent-" ly with what the light of nature dictates " to be our duty, in preserving our repu-" tation, liberty, and property; and in do-" ing all we can in our feveral stations, to " hinder all injury and injustice from others, " as well as ourselves +." Undoubtedly it must: but those exceptions are so plain, that they will always be suppos'd, and consequently there was no need of their being distinctly Specified.

THE Christian religion makes no alteration in the natural rights of mankind; it no where forbids necessary self-defence; or seeking a legal redress of injuries in cases, wherein it may be expedient to restrain violence, and outrage, to maintain private right, and property, and secure to the honest and peaceable the advantages of civil life; but all the explications it gives of the duty of forgiving injuries, are perfectly consistent with this. For the substance of what it recommends

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 341. Origen contra Celsum, l. 7. p.373.
† Christianity &c. p. 340.

and inculcates upon this head, relates chiefly to the temper of the mind; that we be ready to pass by small affronts, and not forward to execute private revenge; that we be difpos'd to put the most candid interpretation upon the defigns and actions of those who have injur'd us, and make all the favourable allowances that the nature of the case will admit; and that while we fuffer the greatest wrongs, we maintain a general benevolence and good-will to our enemies, a fincere defire of their happiness, and a constant disposition, upon all proper occasions, to promote it, and return good for evil. This, I say, is the true notion of forgiving injuries, as it is stated and explain'd in the New Testament. The gospel therefore proposes the example of God, in his conduct toward finful men, as the general rule and measure of that lenity, and forbearance, which we ought to exercise toward each other. Now the utmost that can be inferr'd from hence is, that if our offending brother is so ingenuous as to acknowledge his offence, and, by making all the reparation that is in his power, gives us sufficient reason to think his repentance sincere, we are bound to receive him again into our friend-Ship, and ought never to upbraid him with former faults, but to be as beartily and intirely reconcil'd to him, as if he had never given us any just ground of complaint; as we expect, that God, upon our unfeign'd repentance and reforming the errors of our past conduct.

conduct, will receive us into full favour, and remember our iniquities no more; and that in other cases, after the example of the same most merciful, and compassionate Being, we incline rather to gentle methods, than to demand a basty, strict, and rigorous satisfaction for every affront that is offer'd us; nay, that we still preserve benevolent affections towards an enemy, tho he is unrelenting, and instead of the christian revelation, that in the least disallows of that self-defence, which reason, and the laws of our country direct to.

NAY, 'tis far from being a paradox, that a man may forgive an injury, at the same time that he seeks a legal redress of it. For he is to be confider'd, both as a person who has receiv'd a private injury, and as a member of fociety, which fustains likewise some damage by the injustice and violence that every one of its members fuffers. Now 'tis most evident, that he has no right to forgive the wrong, so far as the general interests of fociety are concern'd; and therefore must be oblig'd, when 'tis necessary to do justice to the community, and for the public good, to prosecute the offender. But then he may be faid to forgive the injury, fo far as 'tis perfonal, and relates to himself as the immediate fufferer,

fufferer, if, according to what the gospel teaches, instead of indulging rancour and malice, and forming mischievous designs against his enemy; he heartily wishes his welfare, and is ready generously to assist him, and do him any private services, that are not inconsistent with necessary self-defence, and the general happiness.

LET me add, that the precept of for-giving injuries, if it had stood in the Christian scheme singly, and without any farther explication, would have been altogether as plain as Confucius's rule, " never to revenge " injuries;" the latter being full as general, and undetermin'd as the former, and requiring the very same limitations, and exceptions. For it will be ask'd, what is revenge? And if it be answer'd, that it is not " legally pro-" fecuting a man who has injur'd me;" it will be faid likewise, that this is not forbidden by the precept of forgiving injuries; and the reason of the thing must as soon, and as easily be apprehended in the one case, as in the other. So that the author of Christianity &c. has shewn only his great partiality, in preferring Confucius's maxim to that of our Saviour; and might as well, and, 'tis not unlikely, would have done the very fame thing, if the Christian precept had been found in Confucius, and bis in the gospel.

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HE goes on to find fault with the phrase of loving our enemies: and the fum of his argument is, that " the passions of love and " hatred given us by God, are to be exer-" cis'd on proper objects. Actions, abstract-" edly confider'd, are not the objects of love " and hate, but persons for the sake of their " actions; and the actions of some men are " too detestable to create in us any senti-" ments, but of aversion; so as to oblige us " to bring them to condign punishment.-" If love carries with it complaifance, esteem, " and friendship, and these are due to all " men; what distinction can we then make " between the best and worst of men *?" Mere cavilling this about the use of a word; and, I may add, idle, ufeless cavilling, since 'tis univerfally known what was intended by it.

Our author himself can't imagine surely, nor can it ever enter into any reader's thoughts, that when our Saviour exhorted to love our enemies, he design'd to recommend an inward esteem of the malicious slanderer, the oppressor, and eruel persecutor, who have discarded all sentiments of bonour, justice, and bumanity; or a complacency in persons of such vile characters; but only the having kind and benevolent dispositions towards them, and

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 342.

a fincere desire of their happiness. And since 'tis obvious to all, that he could mean no more than this, what if it does not come up to the full sense of the word, as 'tis generally us'd at present? This will not so much as prove an impropriety of speech. For might it not be a very common acceptation of it, at the time when our Saviour deliver'd this precept? And have not all people a right to put what senses upon words they please? Or is it reasonable for us to find fault with any language, merely because the same ideas are not fix'd to particular words, as in our own?

But it happens in fact, (which shews that the objection is intirely groundless) that in all moral writings, whether antient, or modern, love most generally signifies, what it does in this precept of the Christian religion, benevolence, and good-will; and may be exercis'd towards particular objects, not only where there can be no esteem, and complacency; but even while we are oblig'd to punish them. Thus it is always allow'd, that a parent may love a wicked and disobedient child, tho he has the greatest abborrence and detestation of his crimes; and to this it is imputed, that he has fuch an affectionate concern for his welfare, and earnest defire of his reformation. Nay, even rigor and severity, and a proper punishment of his faults are suppos'd to be not only confistent with love,

love, but to spring directly from it. I can't help observing upon the whole, that it does not appear, that the author of Christianity &c. means any thing more by not revenging injuries, than that I am not " to punish for " punishment-sake;" and that " common prudence will oblige me, fometimes, to " overlook flight injuries *; it does not appear, I say, that he thinks himself bound. over and above this, to cultivate a benevolent temper, and a disposition to do kind offices for an enemy. And if this be really the case, both his own morals, and those of his oracle Confucius, are vastly inferior to the Christian morality, which inculcates much more noble, and generous virtue.

FINALLY, we are ask'd, Whether "rules concerning morality should not be suited to mens particular circumstances, plainly describing the conduct which they require? Whether this is not the design of the municipal laws in every country? And what benefit subjects could have, from laws written in such a loose, general and undetermin'd manner; as lend, hoping for nothing again, &c? ——'Tis said, We are to render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's; but must we not learn from the laws in every nation, who is Cæsar? And what is his due?——We

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 341.

" are to render all men their dues; but what those dues are, we are to learn from the reason of things, and the laws of the country *."

THE drift of all this strange reasoning must be to prove, if any thing, that general rules of conduct are of no fervice to mankind; whereas, in truth, the whole of natural religion and morality itself confists in general principles, that are of universal and immutable obligation and use, and easily accommodated to particular circumstances. A writer of morals, according to this way of thinking, must be reckon'd to talk loofely, who advises in general " to be charitable to " the poor; to give to those who are in " want; and be ready to affift, and support " others in their necessities, without any " prospect of a recompense;" which is the plain and obvious sense of Lend, boping for nothing again; or if he exhorts " to yield " due obedience and fubmission to magi-"ftrates; or to do justice to all men;" and 'tis absolutely necessary for him to specify, for every man, the particular kind, the proper objects, nay, I can't see how we can help going so far as the very proportion of his charity; to understand the laws and constitutions of every country; and the particular demands which each man has upon

^{*} Page 344.

another. Whereas on the contrary, rules fuited to mens particular circumstances can't possibly be given in a discourse of this kind: or, if they could, as circumstances perpetually alter, they would not be parts of that eternal and immutable law of nature, which it must be the great design of a revelation to recommend, and inforce. There is not one natural obligation this author can name, incumbent upon all mankind, but must be express'd in a general, undetermin'd manner; for if it be particular and circumstantial, it can only be a rule for individuals, and not for the whole rational species. And 'tis altogether as abfurd to expect in a revelation defign'd for the use of all nations, and to last to the end of the world, none but rules suited to particular circumstances, as to talk of an eternal temporary law, or an universal particular. The rule of rendering to all men their dues, if interpreted in general of the payment of just debts, is altogether as plain, as if the particular due was specified; that of rendering to Cæsar, the things that are Cæsar's, as if we were expresly told who was meant by Cæsar; as king George for England; Lewis the fifteenth for France, and the like: and the same may be said of the duty of relieving the necessitious in general, fixing on the most proper objects, and in proportion to our circumstances; that it is an eafy and intelligible rule, in applying which to particular cases, men of the least reflection can

can hardly ever mistake. Indeed, as I have already observed, 'tis a most wild and extravagant attempt for a moralist to endeavour to fix these things precisely, and therefore he must content himself with giving general directions.

I s H O U L D have proceeded farther in the vindication of particular passages of scripture, but that I have reason to hope this part will be undertaken by a very able hand, who, I make no doubt, will do justice to the argument, and give intire fatisfaction to the world. Those which I have consider'd have fallen in incidentally, in pursuance of my defign to shew, that the Christian revelation, notwithstanding the peculiarity of its style, and manner of expression, and all the difficulties and obscurities that are charg'd on it, is, upon the whole, very plain, and ufeful, as a standing rule of religion and morals; and that all its effential doctrines containing belps, encouragements, and motives to virtue, are very obvious and easy to be understood by the bulk of mankind. And after this, all other obscurities, about antient customs, and the like extraneous circumstances, and points merely speculative, will be look'd upon as trifles by the judicious and impartial; and be thought not at all to interfere with the design, and use of these writings, as a divine revelation. However, every reader will see, that what I have faid upon some of the texts cited

cited by the author of Christianity &c. will ferve to explain and defend many others, which, to avoid being tedious, I have not particularly mention'd. But because he has endeavour'd particularly to expose several passages in the bistorical books of the Old Testament, I would, before I conclude this chapter, add one remark more, namely, that tho these passages may be vindicated, as far as 'tis reasonable to expect we should be able to account for all the things contain'd in books written at so great a distance, when the customs and ways of writing were fo different from what they are at present; vet before we allow ourselves to be oblig'd to undertake the defence of them, there is a previous question proper to be consider'd, viz. how far we are bound, by the quotations and references in the New Testament, to acknowledge the divine authority of the Old, and especially of every bistorical account that is given in it. And I mention this the rather, because 'tis most certain, that, in the nature of the thing itself, there is no connection between the two ideas, for instance, of Moses being affisted by God, in an extraordinary manner, in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, and forming their religion and polity; and his infallibility as an biftorian. Nay, he may be a credible and unexceptionable witness to all the facts which he relates upon his own knowledge, or of whose truth and certainty he had himself oppor-

opportunities of being fully inform'd; even tho he should not be exactly right in every circumstance of his history of the world, and the state of religion before his own times; in compiling which, if he had no other helps than from the best bistories and traditions he could meet with, there may be. some defects, and yet the account upon the whole be authentic, and highly valuable. And if upon stating and examining this question fairly it appears, that we are not oblig'd, in order to support the Christian revelation, to defend all the historical passages of the Old Testament, we are eased of an unnecessary trouble; if the contrary, we shall, at least, have the satisfaction to know, that we proceed in a just and regular method, and do not reason in the dark.

CHAP.

CHAP. IV.

AGENERAL defence of positive commands.

I Come now to confider the case of positive duties. Our author supposes, that if Christianity be a divine revelation, it can be nothing else but a revival of the universal and immutable law of nature; that it enjoyns no duties but what are as old as the creation, and as extensive as buman nature; nothing which as to the manner of it only, is indifferent *; and consequently, that there cannot be the least difference between natural and reveal'd religion, but in the methed of their discovery; and " if instituted " religion varies from the religion of na-" ture and reason in any one particular, nay, " in the minutest circumstance, that alone " is an argument, which makes all things " else that can be said for its support totally " ineffectual +. This is the point to be determined; and it must be own'd, that it is a point of very great importance; because, as it is undeniable, that the gospel institution does command several things that are merely pofitive, we must be able to shew that such injunctions are not repugnant to reason, nor

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 122.

fubversive of moral obligations, nor inconsistent with the wisdom, justice, and goodness
of God, in order to make a rational defence
of it. And that we may argue distinctly
and without confusion upon this subject,
and shorten the controversy as much as
possible, let us see what concessions are proper to be made, and lay down some common principles in which both parties may
agree.

- I. THEN, it must be allow'd, that the substance of true religion always has been, and ever will be the same in all ages, and nations; consisting in the belief of such principles, and the practice of such duties only, as are sounded on the nature, and reason of things; and that this universal, eternal and immutable religion cannot be superseded, alter'd, or contradicted by an external revelation.
- 2. That the religion of nature is the whole of religion that is valuable for itself, as having an intrinsic, and necessary goodness; and consequently positive institutions must be intirely subservient to it. They are not design'd, as this author very frequently, but loosely infinuates, to mend the religion of nature, but excite to the practice of it; and are only so far valuable, as they strengthen moral obligations; either by cultivating and improving in our minds such sentiments, as

have a tendency to promote true and substantial virtue; or by guarding against particular errors, and supersticious customs, to which mankind had been long addicted, and which were found by experience to have obscur'd, perverted, and almost intirely destroyed that true religion of rational beings, which results from the immutable relations of things. So that they are insignificant and trisling observances, if they are not belps and motives to the practice of morality, and if they are substituted in the place of it, or undermine it in any instance, burtful and impious.

'Tis indeed very strange, that any who consider the necessary differences of things, should confound the subordination of posttive to moral duties, which is as plain, as that ends are more excellent than means; and that they should think there is any comparison, in point of real value and excellency, between that, which confider'd in itself has nothing at all to recommend it, and would be absolutely indifferent and useless, were it not for the end which it is design'd to promote, and the end itself, the eternal unchangeable religion of nature, which is effentially and intrinsically good. 'Tis the confideration of the end alone that consecrates, and gives a value to the means, and consequently that must be of infinitely fuperior efficacy; and we can have no rule of judging, if what is in itself good for nothing

thing deserves an equal regard, with the most excellent and useful thing in the world.

AND agreeably to these most plain dictates of reason, we find that the scriptures both of the Old and New Testament constantly affert, that instituted religion is for the fake of natural; and declare in the strongest terms, that positive duties, without moral righteousness, are not only mean and despicable, but highly offensive to God; that he lays no stress at all upon them in comparison with the rational duties of piety to himself, and justice and mercy to our fellow creatures; and that we cannot entertain more unworthy and dishonourable thoughts of him than by imagining, that he is as much pleas'd with external Services, that are, in themselves, of no worth or importance, as with an imitation of his perfections, and obedience to moral laws, which is the highest improvement and rectitude of human nature, and the source both of private, and social happiness. This, I say, is the constant strain of revelation, as well as the voice of reason. And the observation of positive institutions may, with reason, be strictly insisted upon, for the tendency it has to promote true goodness; nay, tho God may immediately interpose, and punish the wilful contempt of a positive law more severely, in this world, than the violation of a moral precept; as what may be necessary, upon its first appointment

pointment, to give the former a fanction, and maintain its facredness, and authority, fince it wants that intrinsic goodness, which recommends and supports the latter; this is far from proving, that the duties of instituted and natural religion are upon a level, and much farther from giving the prefer. ence to positive duties above moral. ly way to come to a rational determination in this point is, to confider, when things are fo circumstanc'd, that one or other of these duties must necessarily be omitted, which of the two must give way; and if it be an ever. lasting rule, that, in every supposeable instance of competition, positive duties must yield to moral, this is a demonstration that moral duties are fuperior, and claim our ultimate regard.

3. From these principles it necessarily follows, that as nothing which contradicts natural religion, or weakens any of its obligations, can be part of a revelation which hath God for its author; and no man who is wilfully deficient in any branch of moral duty, can rationally expect to obtain the savour of God, be he ever so scrupulous and exact with respect to ritual and instrumental observances; and consequently that it is the height of folly and presumption, by the utmost care and zeal about instituted religion, to hope to compound for irregularities and excesses of the sensual passions, or for pride, un-

uncharitableness, cruelty and revenge, or any other notorious and hurtful immoralities: fo, on the contrary, those who fincerely practise the great duties of natural religion, comprehended under the two heads of the love of God, and our neighbour, will not be condemned for their ignorance of the peculiar doctrines of revelation, or for not underflanding, or feeing the reason and obligation of positive precepts; because they have attain'd the great end of religion, which all the fubordinate duties of it must be defign'd to promote, viz. rational piety and likeness to God, the right government of their passions, and fixing in their minds habits of justice, and universal benevolence.

HOWEVER, this does not hinder, but that if men wilfully neglect any part of instituted religion, they may be justly punish'd; fince such a wilful contempt even of positive duties apprehended to be commanded by God, is as truely an affront to his wisdom and authority, as a contempt of mo-'Tis a violation of an eternal rule ral laws. of righteou/ness, viz. that God is to be reverenc'd and obey'd in ALL the known fignifications and discoveries of his will; and confequently an immorality. So that even in this case, they forseit the divine favour, not merely for a failure in matters of external ceremony (by which alone, the state of mankind with respect to God's most wise and im-

impartial judgment, and their final happiness or misery is never determin'd) but for transgressing the fundamental law of natural religion itself,

By allowing these things, viz, the superior excellency of natural religion; the moral tendency of instituted means; and the necessary subordination of positive to immutable moral duties; it will appear, that a great part of the reasonings of the author of Christianity &c. is fully answer'd; who has inaccurately, as I would hope only, and not defignedly, in order to mislead the superficial and incautious reader, confounded, throughout his whole book, the false sentiments of the weak and superstitious with the nature of the thing itself. Let us now proceed to confider what he has advanc'd upon this head; and whether it is of any weight against positive duties, as the design, importance, and use of them has been stated, and explain'd.

The argument which the ingenious author seems to lay most stress on, and to think it never could be urg'd too often, is this; that the religion, which God gave men from the beginning, was, without doubt, most perfect; since no religion can come from a being of infinite wisdom and perfection, but what is absolutely perfect. Can therefore a religion absolutely perfect, admit of any alteration; or be capable of adit dition,

"dition, or diminution; and not be as im-"mutable as the author of it? Can reve-

" lation add any thing to a religion thus

" absolutely perfect, universal, and immu-

" table * ?"

Now in order to fee clearly, whether there be any thing in this boafted demonstration, that holds against the nature of pofitive duties rightly understood; 'tis necessary for us to confider, what we must mean when we speak of natural religion as perfect. And in general, there must be some rule or measure of perfection, by which it is to be tried. A thing may be said to be perfect, when, all present circumstances consider'd, it is sufficient to answer its end. A law or rule of conduct therefore, the perfection of which must be judg'd by its fuitableness to the condition of those to whom it is given, and its sufficiency to direct to every thing that is fit, and becoming persons so constituted, and circumstanc'd, may be perfect in that view, or completely adapted to answer its defign, and yet comparatively imperfect; it may be perfect in present circumstances, and very defective in others.

To apply this to natural religion. The original religion or law of nature, which consider'd men only as men, in the integrity

^{*} Christianity &c. Page 3, 4.

and rectitude of their faculties, and not as ignorant, superstitious, and degenerate, was undoubtedly perfect; i. e. it was fuited to their circumstances, and sufficient to teach them their duty, merely as reasonable creatures, and furnish them with all necessary motives to excite to the practice of it; and if they had observ'd it, a revelation would perhaps have been needless. But when they had corrupted, and in a great measure lost the knowledge of the law of their creation, and God, having compassion upon their ignorance, and depravity, thought fit to afford a revelation; tho the ultimate defign of that revelation be, to recover them from their errors and vices to the knowledge and practice of the true religion of nature, all must allow, that their circumstances are vastly different from what they were originally; and from those different circumstances different duties necessarily result. Thus it becomes their duty to acknowledge the divine authority of the messenger, that is sent for their recovery; not only as 'tis in itself fit, that in every instance, they should act agreeably to the truth of things, and characters; but because without this, they cannot receive the revelation itself, nor consequently the advantage that God, intended them by it *. And it may be proper for them

^{*} THO " faith consider'd in itself" [i.e. barely as the act of the mind in affenting to the truth of propofitions]

moreover frequently to confider, and impress some principles upon their minds, as motives and belps to the practice of true religion, and to prevent relapsing into their former superstition, and wickedness, which the reafon of mankind could not discover from the beginning; because they necessarily suppose certain things which did not then exist, viz. that they have departed from the primitive law of their creation, and that a revelation has been given to fet them right again. So that mens particular religious obligations may, and must, in some things, be different by revelation, from what they would have been, had they been left to the mere unassisted light and dictates of reason; and yet

sitions] " can neither be a virtue, or a vice; because men " can no otherwise believe than as things * Christianity &c. " appear to them *: " yet that they appear pag. 51. in such a particular manner to the understanding, may be owing entirely to themselves. Faith therefore may be fully rewarded as the refult of ferious consideration, and impartial inquiry; and unbelief justly punish'd as proceeding from wilful negligence, and vicious prejudices. Aud whenever there is sufficient evidence of the truth of a proposition, and it may reasonably be expected, taking in all circumstances, that men should consider and examine this evidence, which, if fairly consider'd and examin'd, will not fail of convincing the judgment; to believe, must be a duty, and not to believe a vice. This is the fense (as will be evident to every one who reads the New Testament with attention) in which these words are always to be understood, when faith is requir'd as necessary to obtain acceptance with God, and unbelief condemn'd. The one is consider'd as a virtue, and the other as a crime, only as they

spring from good, or bad principles; from moral rectisude, or

depravity of mind.

it may be allow'd, that the law of reason, the original law of human nature, was perfect; i. e. sufficient, if rightly attended to, and observ'd, to answer its end.

IF the ingenious author shall affert, that those duties, which are only fit, upon fupposing a revelation given, are, however, parts of the law of nature, which "takes" in every thing that is founded on the " reason and nature of things *;" that " like " the law of nations, or the laws of parti-" cular countries," they " are only the law " of nature adjusted, and accommodated to " circumstances +;" and that " if our na-" tural notions of the divine perfections " demonstrate, that God will require no-" thing of his creatures but what tends to " their good; whatfoever is of this kind, " is a superstructure that belongs to the law " of nature; or, in other words, what the " reason or nature of the things themselves " plainly point out to us." Let it be fo; the religion of nature then may be not only the original religion of mere reason, but duties that could not be known without a revelation, and which are only proper upon supposing a revelation. And tho this way of speaking may seem to many new, and inaceurate, and is, by no means, to be re-

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 13.

concil'd to the general strain of this author's reasoning; we may be very well contented if he will allow, that faith in Christ, for instance, the belief of a revelation which is not universal (for such, I have already shewn, it is consistent with the perfections of God for him to give) and impressing frequently, and strongly upon the mind such principles, and keeping up the remembrance of such important facts, which, tho grounded intirely upon the acknowledgment of a revelation, have, a moral tendency; that these things, I say, are parts of that religion which is as old as the creation, and as extensive as humane nature.

AFTER what has been faid concerning the fitness and advantage of the thing itself, and fuch concessions, all that remains to be fettled is, whether God may not appoint the manner, in which a thing, that is useful in itself, shall be done; or whether it must be left to every man to do it when, and in what way he thinks fit? In the positive institutions we are speaking of, which tend to fix principles and dispositions in our minds, that are the strongest motives and encouragements to the practice of natural religion; and by perpetuating the design of the revelation, to make us careful how we abuse and pervert it; 'tis plain there is nothing absolutely indifferent, but the manner in which we are to inculcate,

and

and keep alive such sentiments as are in themfelves proper, suited to our circumstances, and of moral use. And therefore if it can be shewn, that there are no objections of any consequence against God's interposing, and sixing this; nay, if upon some accounts it is expedient that he should do it; this will amount to an intire vindication of positive duties.

THE appointing particular rites is not for the fake of the rites themselves, but to engage men in proper and useful reflections, and give them a strong sense of their obligations; which is a rational means of religion. These reflections therefore, and this sense of their obligations, as a means of religion in their circumstances, reason might direct to; and if they were frequently inculcated, and had their due influence upon the mind, the defign of instituted rites would, in a great measure, be answer'd. But if this be sufficient, why is any particular method fix'd? Because men are apt to be negligent of what is left in a general, indefinite, undetermin'd way; whereas by their being oblig'd to certain observances, the design of which, they know, is, to engage them in fuch meditations, and fix in them fuch principles of moral conduct, and which they perform directly with this view, the end is more effectually ascertain'd, and secur'd. I might rest the

the matter intirely upon this foot. For if in particular circumstances such meditations are proper; if the firm belief and lively influence of fuch principles is fit to be cultivated, and improv'd; if these things are of great importance to strengthen moral dispofitions, and support the universal, and conflant practice of the duties of natural religion; the most probable way of producing this good effect is certainly a confideration worthy the infinite wisdom of God. And if, confidering the indolence, carelefness, innumerable avocations, distracting cares, sensual pursuits, and the general conduct of mankind, it appears that things of consequence are likely to be omitted, or very much neglected, if they are not fix'd and determin'd by a particular rule; the appointing fuch a rule clearly demonstrates to us not only the wifdom, but goodness of the supreme Being; fince it is the most effectual means to secure the virtue, and happiness of his creatures.

But to this we may add farther, that the doing a thing in a way which God has prescrib'd, and in obedience to his command, has a natural tendency, with all who have a becoming reverence of his infinite perfections, and consider him as the inspector and judge of their conduct, to beget greater seriousness, and attention of mind, and consequently to make a deeper impression, than

transient cursory thoughts, enter'd on at pleasure, and not under the awe of such an express obligation. So that there is very good
reason why God should interpose his authority, and order that to be done in a particular
manner, which, in the general consideration
of it, is useful; be it either to keep up the
memory of certain facts; or to impress upon
the minds of men such principles as are evidently of moral use, to beget and consirm
good dispositions, or guard against corruptions
of the true religion; and if for a particular
method, for any particular method which is
significant, and natural, and appears wisely
adapted to answer the general end.

SHOULD it be faid, if this be wife and rational, reason will direct to it; why then is it not left to every man's discretion to fix upon those rites which he likes best; which are most suitable to his temper and genius; and which, he knows by experience, are most likely to affect him? Why must the same rules be prescribed to ALL, when their capacities, humours, and passions are so various? And why are they not at liberty to alter them, as circumstances alter, for others which they think will be more effectual? I answer, that this is liable to the same inconveniences as the not having these things fix'd at all, because it being still left at large, the general defign of fuch institutions cannot be

te so effectually secur'd, as if it was determin'd by the fupreme lawgiver; - that if there be any reason for appointments of this nature, a being of perfect wisdom is more proper to take the care of them, than ignorant, mistaken, and fanciful men; --- that the confideration of his immediate command must give a greater folemnity and weight to them, than they can have, if they are confider'd as the refult of mere buman prudence; and above all, that if this matter be not determin'd by some supreme authority, to which all will think themselves oblig'd to fubmit, endless differences and confusions must, not accidentally, but in the natural consequence of things, ensue; and every man's private opinion, prejudice, and humour, being his only rule, rites will be multiply'd infinitely, and a boundless superstition introduc'd.

I READILY grant the author of Christianity &c. that the instituted means prescrib'd
by revelation are not of such fix'd and immutable obligation, "but that, agreeably to
"the law of nature," they are to be practis'd,
or omitted, "as best suits that end for which
"they were ordain'd. To imagine the con"trary (as he judiciously observes) is to
"make things, dependent on circumstances,
"independent; things that are proper only
"under some circumstances, necessary under
"all

" all circumstances; nay, to make ends mu-" table, and means immutable; and that

" these are to continue in force, tho by

" change of circumstances they become pre-"judicial; nay, destructive to the end for

" which alone they were ordain'd *."

WHEN external rites can't be observ'd without great inconvenience, in particular countries, they may undoubtedly be dropt; in like manner, when the observation of a positive precept would be injurious to health, inconfistent with our doing necessary acts of beneficence, which are of prior obligation, and the like. But how does this affect the present argument, which does not suppose that instituted means are fix'd, but with such necessary exceptions? Does it prove in general, that God cannot appoint the manner in which things that are useful shall be done? Or that fuch institutions may not be of standing, and perpetual authority in all cases, wherein they do not destroy, or interfere with their end? May they not be of that nature, as, taking the general state of the world, may be proper (so far as obedience to pofitive laws, which are subservient to morality, and the good of mankind, can ever be requir'd) in all ages, and nations? And may not the observation of them, even with

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 104, 105.

these limitations, be of great advantage, and consequently wifely enjoin'd by the supreme Law-giver? May not things be requir'd, that are (I mean in the nature of the things themselves, for that is the only question at present) of undoubted use upon the whole; tho they may not always suit the circumstances of each individual, or the state of all countries equally, in every age of the world?

THERE is nothing that can with any shew of reason be objected against the fixing positive laws, in the manner in which their obligation has been explain'd, even " in a " religion design'd to extend over the whole " world, and last to the end of it +," but their being impracticable, or not to be obferv'd without great inconvenience in general; and not at certain seasons, and in particular conjunctures only, which can't poffibly be avoided. And I shall shew, when I come to treat particularly of these, from what was most probably the true intention of the legislator, that this is not the case with respect to any of the positive institutions of Christianity; and that the observation of them, by perpetuating the memory of certain facts, guarding against the worst corruptions of true religion, and begetting fuch fentiments and dispositions, as are of evident

moral tendency, must be very useful every where, and in all times. 'Tis sufficient at present to observe, that there may be instituted means, which, with respect to the nature of the actions themselves, may generally be practis'd without inconvenience; and if practis'd only in fubordination to moral duties, the end they are defign'd to promote, be always of use: otherwise, all actions must, in themselves, be attended with more evil than good upon the whole; and it must be denied, either that the same fentiments can be always proper to strengthen moral dispositions; or, that advancing the great ends even of natural religion, will be of advantage in all ages, and countries.

But does not what has been said destroy "the use of all occasional commands, since "it supposes they can't oblige people longer "than they judge it sit to observe them *? Not at all, if they never judge it unsit to observe them, but when it is really unsit; which, I have shewn, may not be the case upon the whole, but only in some particular circumstances that seldom happen, and must be excepted by the wisest, and most useful constitutions of civil government. Let this author prove, that positive commands are necessarily,

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 113.

and in the nature of the things themselves, unfit to be observed in general, and he does fomething; or let him prove, that because they may happen to be abused thro' " the " ignorant prejudices of the weak, and fu-" perstitious, and the designs of ambitious " men +," they ought to be intirely laid afide; and not practis'd by those who understand them rightly, and to whom they are an useful means of religion, in a proper subserviency to their end. But let him take this thought along with him, that if things which are calculated to be always ufeful are to be esteem'd burtful, and discarded, merely because they are perverted, the best, and most excellent will be condemn'd with the worft; and we shall not be able to stop at giving up instituted religion, but must renounce the use of reason itself.

Thus have I largely vindicated positive precepts against the main argument which our author hath urg'd against them, that argument in which he seems most to triumph, viz. the absolute perfection of natural religion, and have endeavoured to explain the general nature and design of them; and shewn, that when he argues against their being of such strict indispensable obligation, as to bind at all times, and in all circumstan-

[†] Christianity &c. p. 109.

ces, he argues not against the things themfelves, but only against the mistakes of enthusiasts, or the corruptions of designing men. It will be very easy, upon this state of the case, to answer all his other objections, which I shall therefore more briefly consider.

THUS, for instance, it appears, that all his reasonings against mere arbitrary commands are nothing at all to the purpose, because 'tis evident from what has been said. that these are not unnecessary, and arbitrary institutions. The ultimate design of them is to inculcate fentiments, or to be a memorial of facts (as I shall prove hereafter, with respect to the positive injunctions of Christianity) which, tho they suppose a revelation given, are, in such a circumstance, very proper to beget moral habits, to excite to a more diligent practice of the duties of natural religion, and prevent mens relapsing into their former gross corruptions of it; and consequently is wife, and rational, and conducive to the perfection and happiness of mankind. There appears in general to be very good reafon, why God may appoint a particular manner of doing things, that are in themselves useful; both as it is the most probable method to fecure the good effect of them, and that they may be more regarded, and make the ftronger impression; and if so, there must be a foundation in reason for fixing any par-

particular manner which is proper to answer the end. So that there is nothing in all this that is, strictly speaking, arbitrary, or unworthy the care of a wise governour. The general design good, and serviceable to virtue; the appointing a particular method best suited to promote this design; and ALL to be considered in intire subordination and subserviency to the eternal and unchangeable laws of morality. Neither the substance of such instituted duties, nor the manner in which they are to be performed, are absolutely indifferent, but there is a reason and use in both.

Ir any shall be so trisling as to object, that if two rites are equally adapted to serve the same design, the choice of either of them must be arbitrary. I answer, that the general reason for appointing some particular rite, is a sufficient reason for taking either of them; but as there is no real difference between the two, one is not, and cannot be prefer'd before the other, as fitter in itself, which would indeed be acting without a reason.

This I take to be a full answer to all our author's long and frequent declamations against arbitrary, and tyrannical precepts, which, tho they may deserve to be consider'd by the rigid imposers of buman ceremonies, that only incumber religion, instead of having

ving any useful influence towards advancing true and substantial goodness; do not at all affect positive duties of divine appointment, for which there is always a reason besides the mere will of the law-giver. And he himself has allow'd, that if there be "any reason to "deprive men of their liberty in indifferent "things, they then cease to be indifferent."

I SHALL add however under this head (tho it is not necessary to vindicate positive precepts as above explain'd, in which there is not the least mark of arbitrariness, and tyranny) that let a thing appear to be, in itfelf, of no particular moral use; let it be allow'd, that we can affign no special reason for its being enjoin'd; but that, abstracted from the confideration of a divine command, it is altogether indifferent, and has nothing, either in its nature, or peculiar tendency, to recommend it above other things, in which men are left at their full liberty; I think it will be very hard, if not impossible, even upon this state of the case, to prove, that there cannot be any general reason for appointing the observation of it, and that one fuch minute variation, " in instituted reli-" gion, from the religion of nature, and rea-" son, makes all things else that can be said " for its support totally ineffectual +."

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 135.

FOR let us suppose a pretended revelation, the defign of which, upon being carefully examin'd, is approv'd of as most wife, rational, and useful, and which is, in all other respects, as perfect as we can conceive any thing of that kind to be. Let this most excellent scheme of doctrine be not only adapted, in general, to promote the highest moral perfection, and happiness of human nature; but fuited exactly to the circumstances, and necessities of a corrupt and degenerate world; to enlighten their reason in those points, about which it was most perverted, and darkned, and reform their most flagrant and burtful errors. If, together with these internal characters, it has the attestation of numerous and undeniable miracles; shall one, or two pofitive institutions (I appeal to the cool, and impartial reason of mankind) shall, I say, one, or two positive institutions, for which we cannot discern that there is any particular reason, set aside all this evidence, which otherwise would be admitted as most clear and unexceptionable?

No miracles indeed will prove irrational and immoral doctrines to be from God, because we are infallibly certain, from our knowledge of his moral perfections, that he cannot reveal any such doctrines; but we are far from being sure, that he can in no case whatever, enjoin the practice of indifferent U 4

things, for which there does not appear, from the peculiar nature, or tendency of the things themselves, to be any special reason; all therefore that we can have to confider is. on which fide the greatest probability lies. And this may foon be determin'd; because we can give no account, how the pretenfions of a doctrine claiming to be a divine revelation should be thus supported, by having such internal marks, as plainly demonstrate it could not proceed from evil spirits, and by the testimony of miracles, which prove beyond doubt the interposition of some superior invisible agent, if it be not really divine; whereas on the other hand, there may be general reasons for enjoining certain things, which appear to have no particular reason founded on the things themselves, or use at all. Whoever denies this must deny likewise, that God can have a wife defign in any of the methods of his providence towards mankind which they do not perceive; and upon such a groundless presumption, which is contradicted by universal experience, refuse to be determin'd by what, himself would otherwife allow, to be the clearest, and fullest proof possible of a divine interposition.

But besides, the using ourselves to reflections of this kind, which such a command will naturally excite in us, viz. "that God "is to be obey'd in all the significations of this will, because as he is absolutely wise, "and

" and good, he can enjoin nothing without a " reason," will perhaps suggest in part what the reason of such institutions may be, viz. to cultivate this principle, and keep up a constant sense of it in the mind. And for the great importance and usefulness of this I shall only fay, that as it tends to habituate to us the highest reverence of God, and most intire submission to his authority; so the want of it has been the true cause, that so many little pretenders to reason and philosophy have, in all ages, taken upon them to censure several things, both in the constitution of nature, and course of providence, merely because they have not understood them; and urg'd their own ignorance arising from the narrowness of their faculties, or perhaps from a fuperficial knowledge, and confus'd way of thinking, their own mistakes, and inadequate conceptions, as real faults in the frame of the universe; and consequently as objections against the absolute wisdom and goodness of the creator, and governour of all things.

AND confider'd in this view, why may not such commands be given to creatures in a state of trial, agreeably to the general end of their being plac'd in such a state, which is not for the information of the Divine mind, but to exercise, in a proper manner, their moral dispositions and habits, and by that means strengthen, and improve their virtue? Let it be granted, that "moral and immoral "things

" things are the most proper subjects for " this ";" 'tis enough that these other may not be improper. And whereas the author of Christianity &c. asks farther, " if earthly " kings, who may be deceiv'd, and for the " most part are so, would be justy esteem'd " tyrants, if they require things of their fub-" jects merely to try their obedience; how " can we think this of the omniscient, infi-" nitely glorious king of kings +?" 'Tis fufficient to answer, that there is no arguing from earthly governments to God's government of the world; and what would be tyrannical in the one, may be very wife and fit in the other; because the power of earthly kings is to be exercis'd no farther, than the end of their civil authority requires, which end, the order, peace, and happiness of society, cannot be any way advanc'd by fuch arbitrary injunctions; whereas the chief design of God's government being to promote inward rectitude, and establish right principles and dispositions in the mind, whatever has a tendency to beget or confirm fuch dispositions may be appointed by him, without incurring the imputation of arbitrariness and tyranny.

THE ingenious author tells us farther that "there is no way to avoid this objection, of God's willing contrarieties; but by "fupposing he requires nothing of men, but

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 176.

what is founded on the nature of things, and the immutable relations they bear to one another; and what, consequently, they are, as far as concerns them, capable of knowing. But this objection is unanswerable by those, who believe the will of God is not always thus founded; but may contain many merely positive things; since men may, after having taken all possible care to be in the right, have very opposite fentiments; and be oblig'd, by the will of God, to hold, and act contrarieties *."

IF he means by things merely positive such as are absolutely useless, or which are commanded only for commanding-sake; these are not the things I am bound to defend, because it will hereafter be shewn that Christianity enjoins nothing of this kind. And I would fain know, what contrariety there is between duties, that differ no otherwise than as means and end? Is there any inconfiftency between positive duties and moral, when the positive are enjoin'd in persect subordination to, and have a tendency to support the practice of moral duties. Do they destroy, or in the least class with each other? The case is only this, that fome duties are requir'd of such as enjoy a revelation, which are not requir'd of those who want it; i.e. in other words, their duties differ, according as their circumstances differ; and this is as true upon the

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 6.

foot of natural religion only, as upon the fupposition of a revelation; and that, not only with respect to the means of religion, but the substance of it. What, for instance, can be more different, than the duties of prosperity, and adverfity; the duties which spring from the mutual relations of parents and children, masters and servants, and the like? If it be faid, that these are universal duties, because they oblige all mankind in fuch circumstances; this may likewise be affirm'd of positive duties, that they would oblige all, if all were in the same circumstances, and had the same knowledge of the revelation. And any farther than they have the means of knowing them, they are not concern'd to know them; their ignorance will not in the least hinder their acceptance with their maker. The fum of the whole is, that upon supposing a revelation communicated to some parts of the world, and not to the rest, (which has been already vindicated) mens particular religious obligations must of necessity be different, tho not inconfistent; and the one have certain duties, which the other cannot discover: In this case indeed, men may, " after having taken all possible " care to be in the right, have very opposite " fentiments, and be oblig'd, by the will of " God, to hold, and act contrarieties," or rather, the one to do some things which the other is not bound to do; and yet neither be awrong, because they may both do all, that can iustly be expected from them.

I HAVE confider'd the matter in this view, that I might not drop any part of our author's sense. But, I own, I am not certain whether he means, that positive and moral duties are contrarieties; or that " men " are oblig'd, by the will of God, to hold, " and act contrarieties," because some are bound to certain duties by revelation, which others, with all their care and diligence, can't discover, nor consequently be under an obligation to practife; or elfe, that those who have equally the use of the revelation may, after an impartial fearch, differ about the nature of positive institutions, and being oblig'd each, by the will of God, to follow the direction of his own judgment and confcience, which, in this case, prescribe contrary rules, must be bound by the same " will, " to hold and act contrarieties." The two former fenses have been sufficiently consider'd, and to the latter 'tis easy to reply, that if there be any thing in it, it must prove, that God can give no laws to mankind of any fort, but what all, who are bonest and impartial, must necessarily understand in the same precise sense; but this is not, and 'tis great folly to expect it ever will be the case, with respect to particular branches even of moral duty. Honest men have always differ'd (and there is no ground to imagine, that fuch differences will cease in any age hereafter) in explaining both the laws

laws of revelation, and reason. And it will be an excellent consequence indeed of our author's reasoning, if, upon this account, we must throw up both positive and moral duties, i. e. in short, all religion, reveal'd, and natural, at once.

AND whereas it is asked, " how it can " be conceived, that God's laws, whether " internally, or externally reveal'd, are not " at all times the same, when the author of "them is, and has been immutably the fame for ever *?" I answer, that this, if rightly understood, infers the direct contrary to what it was intended to prove. For the unchangeableness of God only supposes in general, that he will always necessarily do what is wifest, and best. If therefore some things are proper upon supposing a revelation, for which there could be no foundation at all, if men were left to the mere light of reason; and if it be upon several accounts expedient, that the manner of doing fuch things should be expresly fix'd, and determin'd, which, I apprehend, has been fully prov'd; even the immutable wifdom and goodness of God must oblige him, in these different circumstances, to make mens particular duties and religious obligations different; and command certain things by revelation, which can't be universal laws be-

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 103.

Christian revelation defended. 303 cause not discoverable by all, nor consequently belong to the original religion of nature.

THE only charge which remains against positive duties, is the charge of superstition. Now, in order to set this matter in a clear light, and shew that there is no just soundation for such a charge, I would observe the following things.

I. THAT there is a fense, in which, what the ingenious author feems to think a great abfurdity, may be true, viz. that " what is superstition by the light of nature, " may be a part of religion by revelation *". I don't mean, that what the reason of mankind must necessarily, at all times, and in all circumstances, condemn as superstitious, can ever cease to be so; for this would be to affert, that the natures of things are not what they are, and confequently to maintain contradictions; but that what might justly be esteem'd superstition, if men were lest to the direction of the light of nature only, will lose that character if God interposes, and by an express revelation enjoins the practice of it.

For instance, our author, I make no doubt, will readily allow, that if a thing may "as well be done this as that way +,"

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 136.

the fixing and establishing, by human authority, certain particular rites as necessary, and of universal obligation, and supposing that men are not at liberty to make use of any other, or of none at all, is rank superssition, and enthusiasm. But this I shall endeavour to shew is not, and cannot be the case upon the supposition of a revelation given, and that the matter is determin'd by a divine law.

IT has been already largely prov'd, that the design of positive institutions is to improve moral dispositions, and consequently rational, and good; that there may be a wife reason for appointing a particular method, in which things, that are useful in themselves, shall be done; and consequently, for appointing any particular method that is calculated to answer the general end; and that if there are two methods equally proper, the general reason for fixing any method at all is a fufficient reason for taking either of them. So that the manner of doing a thing, tho in itself absolutely indifferent, may be made a part of mens religious obligations by the great governour of the world, confistently with his most perfect wisdom and goodness; which, if they themselves took upon them to fix as a law binding conscience, would be weak and superstitious. If therefore we are convinc'd, that a command of this fort, which has been shewn to be worthy of God, 13

is actually given by him; the yielding obedience to it is so far from being superstition, that it is a branch even of our moral duty. Our obligation to submit to it results from one of the first principles of natural religion, viz. that God can command nothing but what is just and rational; and consequently, has a right to be universally obey'd; and to say that we are not bound to practise every thing, which we have clear evidence be requires of us by revelation, as well as by the law of reason, is indeed to make all religion superstition.

FOR why is it, that we consider moral duties themselves as parts of natural religion? Is it merely because they are in themselves fit, and have their foundation in the immutable nature and relations of things, without having any regard to the authority of that Supreme being, who has plainly declar'd it to be his will that we should observe them, by framing that constitution, and appointing those relations from which they necessarily arise? Undoubtedly 'tis not. For however amiable, upon this supposition, the practice of those duties might be, however becoming rational beings, and necessary to promote the happiness of mankind; it could not with any propriety be call'd religion, if we excluded the confideration of God as our governour, and judge; and did not regard them as laws which he hath given

given us. And, on the contrary, if we do consider him as our wise, and righteous governour, this will necessarily lead us to practise every thing that we are persuaded is his will, whether moral, or positive; otherwise, we renounce the dependence of creatures on their creator; or suppose, that he is an unjust tyrannical governour who is not sit to be obey'd, and consequently overturn not only all external revelation, but the religion of nature and reason itself.

I HAVE all along suppos'd, that God may be the author of positive institutions, which, I think, has been fully prov'd, and that men are convinc'd, that particular institutions of this kind are divine; and allowing this, if the observation of them be superstition, the consequence will necessarily be the subversion of all religion. But if, on the contrary, this principle be true, without which even natural religion cannot subfift, viz. that the authority of God, plainly perceiv'd, ought, in all cases, to determine our behaviour; wilful disobedience to a positive precept, tho in itself mutable, must be an immorality, and consequently a violation of the law of reason, which is eternal, and immutable. Tho the matter of fuch a command be positive, the argument for obedience is moral.

INDEED if men rest in outward rites even of God's appointment, and are only concern'd about performing the ceremonial part, but are not led by them, according to the design of their institution, to cultivate, and impress upon their minds those useful sentiments, which have a tendency to beget and improve moral dispositions, and are alone the means of religion, the particular manner being only appointed as the most likely way to ascertain their good effect; if they think, that God is pleas'd with mere external forms, which, in themselves, are but trifles, and imagine, that they shall " propitiate an all-" wife and gracious Being by fuch things " as have no worth or excellency in them *;" nay, if they fancy that there is an efficacy, to procure the divine favour, in the best part of instituted means, inculcating proper reflections, and a becoming sense of their obligations, whether the great end of all, producing, and strengthning moral dispositions be promoted, or not; their religion is as truly superstition, as if it was intirely the offspring of their own will and fancy. there be a reason, why things, which are in themselves useful, should be appointed to be done in a particular manner; if this manner be thought of importance above others that, in the nature of things, might be equally

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 136.

proper, only because God, for wise ends, has directed to it; if the whole of instituted means be consider'd as in a necessary subserviency to the eternal laws of morality, and look'd upon as infignificant and trifling, if they do not excite to the practice of that religion, which is fubstantially, and unchangeably good; if it be thought impious to feparate the means from the end, and much more to make them destructive of it, or hope to compound, by the most scrupulous exactness about external and instrumental observances, for the neglect of indispensable moral duties; here is not the least appearance of superstition: No " unworthy " notions entertain'd of God; no conceiv-" ing of him as an arbitrary, light or paf-" fionate * " being, pleas'd, and offended with trifles; but as a wife and gracious governour, who takes the most effectual methods to make the means of religion uleful, and consequently to advance the virtue, and happiness of his subjects; and has establish'd the due subordination of means to ends, and requires and accepts instituted religion only in its proper place, i. e. fo far as it promotes a more strict regard to natural, and the practice of rational, and real goodness. But,

2. As the observation of positive duties, in the manner in which they have

* Christianity &c. p. 135, 136.

been

been describ'd, and the design, and reason of them argued, is not, and cannot, in it felf, be superstition; I shall endeavour to shew farther, that it has no tendency to superstition. That positive institutions have been used superstitiously, and men have laid an equal stress upon them as upon morality itself, can't be denied; nay, that they have refolv'd the whole of religion into external observances, and instead of making it confift in the necessary duties of piety, justice, and charity, placed it not only in the instituted means appointed by God, but in trifling ceremonies, ufeles speculations, and incomprebenfible mysteries of man's inventing, and imposing; and that their zeal for these things, animated by blind superstition, and prejudice, and under the influence of interested, and defigning men, has transported them beyond all bounds, even to despise, and tranple upon the facred and eternal rules of natural religion, we have many sad examples to prove. And let this wild enthusiasm be expos'd to the utmost; let the craft and knavery of politicians, or priests, who have debauch'd the consciences of men, and their natural sense of good and evil, be represented in the most odious colours. But the wife and honest men of all parties, who are concern'd for the purity of religion, heartily wish all possible success to such a design; the fact itjelf, I apprehend, is nothing at all to the point in question: because the most excellent X 3 and

and useful things in the world, thro' the folly and perverseness of mankind, and the prevalency of irregular passions; thro' the weakness of some, and the subtilty and vile management of others, may be the occafions of the groffest corruptions. Thus religion itself has been made use of to sanctify cruelty, perfidiousness, treasons, murders, and the blackest enormities; and the general notion of worshipping God has, accidentally, introduc'd superstition, and idolatry. Persons therefore, who think impartially, won't be inclin'd to argue from events, or the abuses of things; but from their direct and natural tendency. And this is the true state of the question with respect to positive duties, whether in themselves and in their direct consequences, they lead to superstition; or whether this be not an accidental abuse of them (to which the best things are liable) quite contrary to their natural influence, which is to support true and rational religion. If the author of Christianity &c. could prove the former of these, it would be very much to his purpose; but what he has faid directly to this argument is but little, and, I think, of no great weight. Let us proceed however to examine it,

"Tis urg'd then, that "the supposing things indifferent equally commanded with matters of morality, tends to make men believe

" believe they are alike necessary *". If he means by equally commanded, injoin'd as of equal importance, this is undoubtedly true; but every one, that knows any thing of the doctrine of scripture, must know that this is far from being the case; positive duties being always represented as inferior and subservient to moral, and of no significancy or value in comparison with justice, mercy, sidelity, and other branches of the law of nature, which are of supreme, eternal, and indispensable obligation. Let the argument therefore be justly stated, and as I would fuppose this author himself intended it, and 'twill run thus; that " the supposing things " indifferent to be commanded as well as " matters of morality, tho they are declar'd " to be of far less importance, and of no worth at all, if they don't promote a " stricter regard to morality, tends to make " men believe they are alike necessary, and " lay an equal stress upon both." Which is, as if a man should say, that my telling another light and darkness are two very different things, has a tendency to make him think they are the same. One would rather be apt to conclude, that the enjoyning one thing in subordination to another, and conflantly inculcating that subordination, must have a necessary tendency, which, 'tis very strange, should ever fail of its effect, to

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 149.

make all, but ideots, and mad people, believe, they are of vastly different importance. And if it be likely that the bulk of mankind will always be so indolent and thoughtless, as to difregard such plain directions, the plainest indeed that can be given them, there is no possible guard against their falling into superstition; but, let what caution will be us'd, as long as there are means and ends, which must be allow'd upon the foot of natural religion, as well as of revelation, they " will put a greater stress on means, tho of " fome use in religion, than their nature " will bear; to the confounding things of " the greatest moment with those of the " fmallest *."

AGAIN, "Tis said farther, that because "sensible things make a deeper impression on the minds of the common people than "words; that is a just reason against their use in religion †." The deeper impression itself, can certainly be no reason against, but rather for them; because it must undeniably be of great use, if it be corrected, and bounded by reason, and does not produce superstition, and enthusiasm. But this will be the effect, "because the vulgar, who genemally look no farther than externals, do "not use them barely, as they do words, "to express their meaning; but conceive

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 150.

" in them I know not what internal holi-" ness; and think such symbolical repre-" fentations as necessary as the things repre-" fented by them; nay, by degrees, forget-" ting the reason of their institution, come " to idolize them, as the Israelites did the " brazen serpent *." This is still arguing only from facts, and not from the natural tendency of things; whereas the true question is, whether the revelation has not laid down very plain rules to prevent such misapprehenfions, by declaring, that instituted rites have no fanctity in them, and are no better than any the most useless and trifling ceremonies, if they don't promote moral goodness; and consequently, whether the common people, if they would use their reason, might not eafily avoid fuch groundless, and superstitious conceits? If it be faid, that we may argue however with probability, that those abuses will always happen, because they ever have happen'd " in all religions whatever, " where fymbolical representations have " been used +:" I answer, that as the defign of revelation is to teach men otherwise; as it is a very plain and sufficient rule for this purpose, which if they give the least attention to, they will be better inform'd; God is not answerable for consequences. superstition be so much the foible of mankind, as indeed the experience of every age testifies,

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 173.

all that can be expected from the wife governour of the world is, that if he communicates a revelation, proper care will be taken to prevent it. Now this is, in reason, as effectually done by declaring, that all external rites are in themselves of no account, and have no virtue but what they derive from a subserviency to their end; as if none but moral things were made a part of religion. There is no more foundation for it, really, in the one case, than in the other; and by the fame means that it prevails now, it would also prevail if any other rule was given, the plainest and simplest that can be thought of. For as the matter stands at present, if men would think, they must certainly avoid all fuch hurtful errors; and if they will not, besides that their religion is good for nothing, how can they be fecur'd, upon any possible supposition, from the grossest extravagancies?

Our author has one passage more upon this head, which indeed is very extraordinary. "As long (he says) as men believe the good of society is the supreme law, they will think it their duty to be gowern'd by that law; and believing God requires nothing of them but what is for the good of mankind, will place the whole of their religion in benevolent actions, and to the utmost of their abilities copy after the divine original; but if they are made

" to believe there are things, which have no " relation to this good, necessary to falva-" tion; they must suppose it their duty, to " use such means as will most effectually " serve this purpose.—"Tis to this prin-" ciple we owe the most cruel persecutions, " inquifitions, crusades, and massacres; tu-" mults, seditions, rebellions, &c *." i. e. " If men are made to believe there are things, " which have no relation to the good of " fociety [or which do no good, or harm] " necessary to salvation; they must suppose " it their duty to use such means as will " most effectually serve this purpose [of " doing neither good, nor hurt;] and upon " this principle of doing no mischief, do " all the mischief they can, and perse-" cute and destroy their fellow-creatures." Does it follow, that because God commands some things, which, if in themselves they are good for nothing, are not burtful; the people must naturally be led to think, that 'tis not only an innocent thing, (which itself is going a prodigious length) but their duty to commit the vilest injustice and cruelty? If they can draw fuch inferences as these, they are not capable of being instructed, nor fit to be reason'd with. I might add that none of the positive institutions of Christianity are of the kind this author speaks of, but have all a tendency to promote mo-

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 151, 152.

rality, (and one of them, in particular, the most universal, disinterested, and generous benevolence) and consequently the greatest good of mankind.

Bu T my design in citing this passage was not to argue against it, the defect in the reafoning being too gross to escape any reader's notice, who thinks at all of what he reads; let it therefore ferve only as a specimen (I chuse to censure in the most modest, and favourable manner) how apt even ingenious disputants are, in the heat of controversy, to overshoot themselves; and impose upon their own better understandings so far, as to join ideas together that have in nature no connection, or dependance; and put things into the conclusion, for which there is not the least foundation in the premises. A method of arguing, by the way, whereby any thing may be concluded from any thing; nay, even contraries made to infer each other. Having shewn thus largely that instituted religion is not, in itself, superstition; and if rightly understood, (and the revelation is so plain, that 'tis very unaccountable that any should take it wrong) has no more a tendency to superstition, than natural religion itself; I shall conclude this chapter with observing,

3. THAT Christianity, as it requires only two or three plain and ufeful positive duties; strictly obliges its professors not to add

to

to them, by declaring against all impositions *; and more particularly, that the religion enjoin'd in the gospel is pure and spiritual +, not to be incumber'd and corrupted by human forms and ceremonies; nay, that we worship God in vain, if we teach for doctrines the commandments of men ‡; Christianity, I say, feems, by these things, to have guarded more effectually against enthusiasm and superstition, than if it had explicitly requir'd only moral duties, and left it to every man's fancy to invent the means of religion for himfelf. For, by this excellent constitution, all the means of religion, being of God's appointing, will be wife and rational; and if men understand, and resolve to follow the directions of the revelation, nothing that is weak and enthusiastical can be introduc'd. But if every one be allow'd to act according to his private opinion, and humour; or as he is influenc'd by his fears, and foolish notions of the Deity; he may (and there are many circumstances supposeable, in which 'tis probable he will) run the utmost lengths of an unbounded, and endless superstition.

^{*} Rom. 14. 2, 3, 4, 5. Gal. 5. 1, 13. † John 4. 23, 24. † Mat. 15. 9.

CHAP. V.

A particular vindication of the peculiar positive institutions of Christianity.

TIS one great excellency of the Chri-Itian revelation, that its positive in-stitutions are very few, as well as admirably calculated to promote and encourage the practice of virtue; fo that our religion is not incumber'd with ceremonies, nor our minds diverted from more important and useful duties; the main substance of Christianity being the law of nature explain'd upon the noblest principles, and inforc'd by the strongest motives. But it will naturally be ask'd, if the fewer the better, would it not be best of all if there were none? That does not follow, because two or three may be very belpful, (especially if we consider, that a revelation defign'd to be of universal advantage, must be calculated chiefly for the vulgar; and if it was fuited to the taste of the few, in every age, who think and reafon more closely, and abstractedly, it would, with respect to the bulk of mankind, be useless) two or three positive precepts, I say, may be very belpful, when a great number would be burthensom, and perhaps too much engage

engage the attention. -- However, if this inference will not hold, does not the obfervation which has been made reflect on the Mosaic institution, in the same proportion as it does honour to the Christian? If it be a circumstance very much in favour of the latter, must it not be a great prejudice against the former, which was a law abounding in ceremonies, and ritual obfervances? I answer, that it undoubtedly proves the fuperior excellency of the Christian religion; but, I apprehend, will not conclude what the adversaries of revelation would infer from it, viz. that the law of Moses was not of divine original. For tho when God gives a revelation that is defign'd for general use, and consequently considers men only as reasonable creatures, and is not adapted to the genius, complexion, or state of any particular nation, 'tis natural to expect, that it will be plain, and simple, and not overloaded with things of an external and positive nature; yet there are circumstances supposeable, in which even a ceremonious religion may answer very valuable purposes. And this I take to have been the case with respect to the Jewish rites.

God, who was not oblig'd to give an external revelation at all, nor consequently to make it universal, thought fit, in his infinite wisdom (after having reveal'd himself, at sundry times, to particular persons) to chuse

chuse the posterity of Abraham, as a reward of his fignal piety, and extraordinary virtue, in order to preserve amongst them the acknowledgment and worship of himself as the one true God, and the principles of natural religion (which were almost lost, in other nations, by the universal increase of idolatry and superstition) pure and uncorrupt, till the time came, which he had fix'd for a more general reformation; and order'd it so in the course of his providence, that by their captivities, dispersions, and the translation of the books of their religion into Greek, &c. the revelation he had afforded them might be of some use to the Gentile world; both by scattering here and there good principles and notions of natural religion; and raising, throughout the East, about the time of our Saviour's coming, a pretty common expectation of an extraordinary person, to appear in Judea. The end therefore, which God had in view, not being attainable, without preferving them a distinct people, in their religion, customs, and manners, from other nations, the law of ceremonies was instituted with this view; and if it was the most likely method to answer the great purpose for which it was intended, that will be a fufficient vindication of the wildom of it.

AND, I think, there will be no great difficulty in proving this, if we consider how the

the Jews were circumstanc'd. A people who had been strongly prejudic'd in favour of idolatrous and fuperstitious customs, by living in Egypt, in those early ages of the world the most famous feat and nursery of superstition; who affected a religion of pomp and ceremony; were incompassed on all sides by idolaters; and appear to have been inclin'd, upon all occasions, to fall in with the idolatry of the neighbouring nations: a people, I say, so situated and disposed, would probably have kept no order, if their national weakness and prejudices had not been in some measure indulg'd: And the best fecurity against their renouncing the worship of the true God, and joining in the idolatrous rites that prevail'd all around 'em, was to divert them, by giving them innocent ceremonies of their own; which, besides, as they were practis'd in honour of bim, kept up a constant sense of his authority, and, upon that account, must have a natural tendency to settle, and establish their minds. In like manner, those rites which were defign'd to hinder their free commerce with other nations, and imitating the customs and usages among them especially, which had any relation to their superstition, must have been wisely adapted to the state and circumstance of things; because an imitation of the manners of the Gentiles, and contracting an intimacy and familiarity with them, would have led naturally, and almost in-

insensibly, to the practice of their idolatries: and 'tis evident that rites and ordinances of this kind are a great part of the Mosaic institution.

I MIGHT add, that several things which are reckon'd to belong to the religion of the Yews, were only branches of their civil con-Aitution; and farther, that as we are able to affign a good reason in general, from their temper, prejudices, situation, and the wife views of providence in preserving them a Jeparate people, why they should be indulged in a ceremonious worship, as being the furest way to keep them at the greatest distance from the manners and customs of their idolatrous neighbours; fo, 'tis not at all unlikely, that, if we were thoroughly acquainted with the circumstances of those times, we might fee a particular reason for chusing the ceremonies that were appointed above others; and nothing strange, if, in a period, where we have scarce any light from history to direct our inquiries, we can't account distinctly for every institution.

But as this whole affair is a fort of digression from my main design, I would not enlarge upon it; and shall therefore only make one observation more, viz. that less the people should be diverted, by the multitude of rites to which they were oblig'd, from an attention to those infinitely more important duties,

duties, in which the effence of true religion must always consist; and lay so much stress upon ceremonial institutions, as to depretiate and neglect immutable moral obligations; all possible care is taken, in the writings of the Old Testament, to guard against such superstitious abuses. The substance of religion is expresly declar'd to lie in those things only, which are intrinfically good; and pofitive institutions to be mere insignificant trifles in comparison of piety, justice, and mercy; nay, to be even offensive, and abominable in the fight of God, when they are put upon a level with the eternal laws of natural religion. The fentiments upon this subject are the justest, strongest, and most sublime that can be found any where, and frequently inculcated by prophets rais'd up for that very purpose; so that 'twas nothing but wilful perverseness that made the Jews fo zealous for their ceremonies, to the contempt and subversion of morality; and even the weakest among them, if they had read their own scriptures with the least care, could not have fallen into fuch a pernicious error, which is fo explicitly and directly condemn'd.

I PROCEED now to what I at first proposed, "a particular vindication of the pe"culiar positive institutions of Christianity;"
and in this I need be but short, because it will immediately appear, upon their being
Y 2 truly

truly stated and explain'd, that they are entirely subservient to morality; the strongest obligations upon us to the practice of universal virtue; and have a direct tendency to encourage and strengthen the best, and most useful dispositions of human nature; dispositions that will make men most amiable, and easy in themselves, and most agreeable and beneficial to others.

By baptism we voluntarily, and in the most folemn manner, make a profession of the Christian religion: And as it is done freely, and out of choice, we necessarily oblige ourselves by this action to imitate the life of Christ, and govern our temper and behaviour by the rules he has prescrib'd, i. e. to copy after the most perfect example, and practise the most entire, generous, and useful virtue, that was ever prescrib'd by any scheme of philosophy, or institution of religion: We oblige ourselves to that rational piety, impartial justice, universal, difinterested, and condescending goodness, and strict temperance, which Christianity so clearly recommends, and powerfully inforces; expecting, upon these terms only, the favour of almighty God, and an happy immortality. And can any thing be more becoming rational beings, than to bring themselves under the strictest obligations to promote the true dignity and perfection of their nature, and the general good of their fellow creatures?

IF it be faid, that our very profession of the Christian religion obliges us to all this, without the use of any particular rite or ceremony: I answer, that doing it by a folemn rite, and in a public manner, will be an additional motive, with all who have a sense of ingenuity, to perform what they have voluntarily engaged; that the doing it in a way appointed by God, and in obedience to bis command, has a natural tendency to make them more fincere in their refolutions, give them a more lively sense of their obligations, and leave a deeper impression upon the mind: And besides, by appointing a particular rite, and making it mens duty to fubmit to it, every man is put, at his first setting out in religion, upon examining the evidences of it, and the different natures and consequences of virtue and vice; by which means his religion will become the matter of his deliberate and free choice. For the the bulk of mankind go on in the beaten track, and because they are never call'd upon to make a particular inquiry, take their religion implicitly, just as the chance of education and custom directs; yet one would imagine, that when they are bound, by a ceremony instituted on purpose, to make a solemn profession of it, this should always suggest to them, that now is the proper time to confider ferioully upon what foundation it stands, and the reasons by which it is supported; and Y 3 what-

whatever the real fact be, I am sure it is the natural tendency of the thing: And therefore it must be calculated, in itself, to answer the most useful purposes, because nothing can be of greater importance towards making men fix'd and steady in a virtuous course, than their entring upon it after mature deliberation, and a full conviction of the judgment.

AND if there are these uses of some particular rite, it will be a sufficient justification of any fingle one, that it is as fit as any other, and does not interfere with the main defign of This, I fay, is as much as the institution. can, in strict reason, be requir'd. But, beyond this, it may be urg'd in favour of baptism, the initiating ceremony of the Christian religion, that it is, itself, the most natural, and fignificant that can be, and expressive of those very obligations, which we bring ourfelves under by submitting to it. This is strongly represented by St. Paul in the following passage, (if we understand by baptism the rite that was originally appointed, and always practifed in the first Christian churches, viz. immersion; otherwise indeed, the beauty and force of the comparison is entirely lost) Know ye not, that so many of us as were bap-tized into Jesus Christ, were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him, by baptism, into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the

the father, even so we also should walk in new-ness of life *.

I NEED not fet myself to prove, that this is a rite which may generally be practifed without inconvenience, and consequently is fit to be enjoin'd in a religion design'd for all ages and nations; because the constant experience of those who use it, adhering strictly to the original institution, is a most convincing demonstration of this; amongst whom, notwithstanding some instances of a precipitate, and incautious zeal, it scarce ever is, and if but common prudence was exercis'd, we have the utmost reason to believe, never would at all be, attended with ill consequences; and besides, an attempt of this kind would be trifling with the reader, in an age, in which the practice of cold bathing is so frequently recommended even to the most tender constitutions, and acknowledg'd to have such excellent effects.

Upon the whole, there is every circumstance in this positive institution of Christianity, that can recommend it, and manifest the great wisdom, and goodness of God in appointing it. The general design of it is to oblige Christians, in the most solemn manner, to a conduct that is becoming rational creatures, conducive to the restitude of human

^{*} Rom. 6. 3, 4.

nature, and the good of fociety, viz. to abstain from vice and impurity of all kinds, and practife the most universal, constant, and amiable virtue. The fixing a particular rite is of great use, to engage their attention, and give them a stronger sense of their obligations, and as it binds ALL to a voluntary and deliberate engagement to lead a fober, righteous, and godly life.— As the substance of the duty, or the principal thing intended by it, must always be useful, the external ceremony itself is of that kind, as may generally be practis'd, not only without inconvenience, but with advantage, and is withal very natural, and fignificant, and wifely adapted to the main defign. To which we may add, that there is the utmost care taken to prevent fuperstitious abuses of it, not only by afferting in general, the utter infignificancy of all instituted means without real virtue and goodness; and constantly inculcating the moral use of this particular institution; but by declaring in express terms, that 'tis not the external part of baptism, putting away the filth of the flesh, for which we are confider'd as good Christians, and intitled to the reward of eternal life, but the answer of a good conscience towards God *.

ANOTHER positive institution of Christianity is what we commonly call the Lord's

Supper,

supper. And as, in this ordinance, the death of Christ is commemorated under the notion of a sacrifice, I shall, before I specify the moral uses of it, endeavour briefly to explain, and vindicate that representation: Which is the more necessary, because nothing in the whole Christian doctrine has been more grosly misrepresented, or given its adversaries, who take their accounts of it from party writers, and not from the New Testament itself (a method of proceeding that argues great unfairness, and prejudice) a more plaufible occasion to triumph. But if the matter be rightly confider'd, it will appear, that the advantages, which they think they have against the Christian religion upon this head, are but imaginary. For,

I. THE New Testament no where represents God as a rigorous, inexorable being, who insisted upon full satisfaction for the sins of men, before he could be induc'd to offer terms of reconciliation. It says, indeed, not one word of satisfaction, much less of strict and adequate satisfaction; not a syllable of the infinite evil of sin; of infinite justice; the hypostatical union, or the deity's being so united to the man Christ Jesus, as that the two infinitely distinct natures constitute one person, and, by virtue of this union, giving an infinite value to the sufferings of the human nature, and enabling it to pay a strict equivalent to God's offended vindictive justice.

All this, I say, is the invention of more modern ages, (who, by subtil distinctions, and metaphysical obscurities, have deform'd true Christianity to such a degree, that scarce any of its original features appear) and bears not the least similitude to the language of the New Testament; in which, the Divine being is always describ'd as slow to anger, merciful, and condescending to the frailties and infirmities of mankind; and forgiveness of sin represented, not as a thing for which a price of equal value was paid, and which might consequently be demanded in strict justice, but as a voluntary act of pure favour, and the effect of free and undeserved goodness. Nay, farther,

- 2. The New Testament never asserts, that God could not have pardon'd sin without a sacrifice, nor consequently, that the death of Christ, consider'd in that view, was, upon any account, absolutely necessary. If indeed it be prov'd, that this method is of divine appointment, this will, and ought to satisfy us, that there are wise reasons for it; but it can't be inferr'd from hence, that 'twas absolutely necessary, or that the same wise purposes might not have been as effectually answer'd some other way. Nor,
- 3. Does the Christian religion any where expressly declare, or so much as intimate to us, that natural reason could not discover God

God to be a propitious being, and ready to be reconcil'd to his guilty creatures upon their repentance; but, on the contrary, lays down this as the fundamental point of all religion, and consequently as a principle that might be argued with great probability, that God is a rewarder of them who diligently seek him *; and supposes, that the great goodness which he has demonstrated in the general constitution of things, and course of providence, was a rational encouragement to the Gentile world to serve and worship him, in hopes of acceptance and mercy.

4. It is of great importance to observe, that the death of Christ (as far as appears) would have happen'd, if it had never been defign'd as a facrifice; and confequently was not appointed arbitrarily and folely with a view to that. The true state of the case feems to be this. The wife and merciful God, having compassion on the ignorance, and degeneracy of the world, determin'd, at a certain time fix'd by his infinite wisdom, to interpose; and when they had corrupted the religion of nature, and were not likely to recover the right knowledge of it, teach them their duty by an external revelation. The person whom he chose to be his messenger, is characteriz'd as his Son, an innocent person, of great dignity and excellence, whom he had before imploy'd in the

most important transactions, and who was highly belov'd and favour'd by him; and the principal reason of his employing one so extraordinary as his minister upon this occasion, we are told in the New Testament, was to conciliate greater attention and regard to his doctrine *. We are to take it therefore, I think, that the first view of God in sending Christ into the world was, that, as a prophet, he might restore the true religion, and publish the glad tidings of life and immortality, and by this means resorm the errors and vices of mankind.

Bur as he was fent to preach a most strict and boly doctrine, among a people abominably corrupt and vitious; to recommend a rational, and spiritual worship of the Deity to those who were fond of form and ceremony, and refolv'd the whole of religion into external rites, and traditional superstitions; and assum'd the character of their Messiah, or king, when both his circumstances in life, and the religion he taught, contradicted the expectations they had entertain'd of temporal pomp and grandeur under the Messiah's government, and consequently disappointed all the views of their covetousness and ambition; he gain'd comparatively but few converts abus'd and persecuted by the priests, and

^{*} Matt. 21. 37. Heb. 1. 1, 2. chap. 2. 2, 3.

men in power, whom the multitude blindly follow'd; and at last put to death with great torment and ignominy. From this plain, and unquestionably true account of the fact, it appears, that his suffering was the natural consequence of attempting to reform the manners of a degenerate age, and opposing the superstition, and darling prejudices of the fewish nation; and could not be avoided but by such a compliance on his part, as would have been inconsistent with virtue and integrity, or by a miraculous interposition of providence. And God, who foresaw all this, appointed that the death of Christ, which really happen'd in the natural course of things, should be consider'd as a sacrifice.

LET me observe by the way, that by confidering the matter in this light, all objections against the justice of God, in determining that an innocent person should suffer for the guilty, are entirely obviated. For the death of Christ was not appointed abfolutely, and arbitrarily with this view; but, which is vastly different, and can't fure have the least appearance of injustice, it fell out just as other events do, in the common course of things; and all that can be immediately attributed to God in the whole affair is, that he fent him into the world, tho he forefaw the consequences of it; and order'd that his death, which would have happen'd, without a miracle, if there had been no fuch design,

defign, should be regarded as a facrifice. Tho, I must own, I can't see, if the matter had been otherwise, how it could be unjust, or tyrannical, to propose even to an innocent person to suffer, with his own free consent, in order to promote so great a good; especially if we suppose, what the Christian revelation expressly teaches in the present case, that he would be gloriously and amply rewarded for it. Having thus remov'd all the difficulties of any moment that lie against this doctrine, the only thing that remains is to shew, what wise ends might be serv'd by it.

I SHALL not inquire into the original of expiatory sacrifices, which were as early in the world as the first accounts of history; whether they were owing to an express appointment of God, as may feem probable from the History of Mojes; or had their rise from the fears and superstition of mankind; who being uneasy under a sense of guilt, confus'd in their reasonings about the goodness of the Deity, and uncertain whether he would accept them notwithstanding past offences, upon their repentance and reformation only (tho, I make no doubt, they might have argued this truth, with a good deal of probability, even from the light of nature) would naturally fly to every little expedient, that their bewilder'd imaginations suggested might be proper; and so began first with sacrificing brute

brute creatures; and afterwards, as their distrust and fears increased, had recourse, in many Heathen nations, to the abominable practice of human sacrifices: Which shews plainly, that their reason was more and more perplexed, and corrupted, and darkened to a prodigious degree, with respect to the very fundamental principles of religion and virtue.

IF facrificing was entirely an human invention, 'twill be hard to give any account of it, more than of innumerable other fuperstitions, which, in the darkness and extreme depravity of the Pagan world, almost universally prevail'd. Human sacrifices are a difgrace to our nature, as well as in the highest degree dishonourable to God. And for others, there is no foundation at all in reason to suppose, that they could expiate the guilt of moral offences, or be of the least efficacy towards reinstating the finner in the divine favour. On the other hand, if facrifices were originally of divine appointment, they could not be defign'd to propitiate the Deity, because the very institution of them neceffarily suppos'd, that he was already propitious. For what end then were they ordained? Was it because the all-wise and merciful governour of the world delighted in the blood of innocent animals? or was he fond of being ferv'd with great expence, and ceremony? These are low and unworthy conceptions

ceptions of him. All the uses therefore that 'twas possible, in reason, for sacrifices to serve, or consequently, that they could be design'd to answer, if they were of divine original, may, I think, be reduc'd to these two; viz. keeping up a firm belief of God's reconcileableness, and being ready to forgive his guilty creatures upon their repentance; and, at the fame time, a strong sense of the evil of sin, and their own demerit upon the account of it. In this view of standing memorials, and testimonies to the most important truths, they might be very useful; but proper expiations they neither were, nor could be, whether they began from superstition, or immediate revelation.

AND now the death of Christ may be very fitly represented as a facrifice, nay, defcrib'd in the strongest sacrifical phrases, fince it answer'd completely all the rational purposes, that expiatory sacrifices could ever 'Tis a standing memorial of God's being propitious, and inclin'd, as the Christian revelation affures us, not only to forgive fin in part, but entirely; and not only to remit the whole of the punishment which the finner had deserv'd, but moreover, to bestow on him the glorious reward of eternal happiness upon his fincere repentance, and reformation, and persevering in a virtuous course: So that it removes the uncertainty of our natural reasonings, and is wisely calculated to main-

maintain, in all ages, a firm belief of that fundamental principle of ALL religion, which mens fuperstitious fears had very much corrupted, and darken'd; and gives the strongest possible encouragement to virtue.

AGAIN, the death of Christ consider'd under the notion of a facrifice will be, to the end of the world, a most lively memorial of the evil and demerit of fin. Nay, as God, in his infinite wisdom, has order'd it in fuch a manner, that nothing less should be consider'd as the sacrifice for the sins of the world, than the death of a person so dear to him, and of such transcendent dignity and excellence; he has, by this appointment, declar'd much more strongly his displeasure against fin, and what the sinner himfelf deserv'd to suffer, and cut off more effectually, from wilful and impenitent offenders, all ground of presumptuous hope, and confidence in his mercy, than 'twas possible to do by any sacrifices of brute creatures. So that by the way in which he has condescended to pardon us, there is the utmost discouragement given to vice, and the greatest care taken, that could be by any method whatever, to preserve the bonour of the divine government, and the reverence due to the authority of its laws. For besides what hath been already suggested, a sense of our ill deserts upon account of our transgressions, of which the death of Christ, represented as

a facrifice, is a most affecting memorial, has a natural tendency to inspire us with the deepest humility, and fill us with shame and remorse for having deviated from the rule of right, and consequently, to make us more circumspect, and regular in our future behaviour; and a sense of God's great goodness in freely forgiving our offences, when we had merited quite the contrary, must, if we have any sentiments of gratitude or honour, make us solicitous to please, and fearful of offending him.

IF it be ask'd, how the death of Christ can answer the purpose of an expiatory sacrifice, when it happen'd in the natural course of things, and was not appointed directly, and only with that view? I answer, that fuch facrifices being never defign'd to propitiate the Deity, or as proper expiations; but only as memorials, in the manner above explain'd; there is no difficulty in accounting for it. For, in all other cases, it was God's appointing, and accepting the facrifice only, that made it a proper memorial; otherwife it could have no fignificancy, but what the fancy and superstition of men suggested. The use of sacrifices therefore depending entirely on his institution of them; or, at least, the use of those which were directly of his ordaining being that, and that only, which he intended; it follows, in the very nature of the thing, that if he is pleas'd to call the death

death of Christ a facrifice, and would have it consider'd under that character, it must be a fit memorial of all he design'd should be represented by it. And besides, it has been shewn, that there are several circumstances which render it a more useful memorial, than any other sacrifices that were ever offer'd.

LET me add to what has been faid concerning the advantages of confidering the death of Christ as a facrifice in general, that by its being describ'd as the one offering, which has perfected for ever them that are fanctified*, the Christian religion has guarded, in the most effectual manner, against the use of ALL facrifices for the future; and particularly against buman sacrifices, one of the most monstrous corruptions of any thing which has born the name of religion, that ever appear'd in the world. And I would hope, that even its adversaries will allow this to be a great argument in its favour; that it was so wisely suited to the state of the world at that time; and not only abolish'd facrificing, but, in a way, accommodated in some measure to the general conceptions and prejudices of mankind, and consequently the more likely to take, guarded against the revival of a custom afterwards (preferving however all the rational uses of it) which had been the fource of infinite super-Aition.

^{*} Heb. 10. 14.

SHOULD it be said, that there is no need of fuch memorials as facrifices were, and the death of Christ is represented to be; because if the Christian religion had afferted clearly, that God is a propitious being, and particularly express'd the terms, upon which his guilty creatures might be reconcil'd to him; if it had declar'd absolutely against the use of ALL facrifices, and condemn'd especially the barbarity and inhumanity of buman facrifices; this alone would have been sufficient: I answer, that it might indeed have been sufficient; but how does it appear, (which is the point on which the argument wholly turns,) that the appointing a memorial of these things, in the sacrifice of Christ, is useless? Thus much is undeniable, that these things don't in the least interfere; but besides, was not the great end in view most likely to be fecur'd by positive declarations, and a standing memorial both, that will naturally give light to, and strengthen each other? To which we may add, that the fuperstition of men will in some circumstances pervert the plainest words; but'tis not so easy to evade the defign of a memorial, especially in that very way, viz. under the notion of a sacrifice, to which their superstition would directly tend.

THERE is nothing, that I can find, advanc'd by the author of Christianity, &c. upon the head,

head, but what has been fully obviated, or goes upon the common mistakes of the scripture doctrine of Christ's facrifice. Only whereas he fays, " that the reasons assign'd for it " could never influence those, who never " heard of Christ*;" I allow it. But what then? Is it not enough that they may be of great use to those who bave beard of him? Nay, the doctrine of Christ's being a propitiation for the fins of the whole world is not therefore useless, because a great part of the world know nothing of it, fince it is of the highest moral advantage to those who enjoy the christian revelation; as it reprefents to them the universal goodness of the common father of mankind, and that in every nation, he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him; and consequently encourages universal benevolence, and an esteem of the whole rational creation, however distinguish'd by external privileges; and restrains that spiritual pride and insolence, which prompts many christians, to the repreach of our holy religion (and is indeed too common in all religious sects, who imagine the superiority to be on their side) to confine the favour of God to themselves, and despise, censure, and condemn all others,

I PROCEED now to point out a few of the excellencies, and eminent advantages of

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 418:

that positive institution of Christianity, in which we commemorate the death of Christ; and particularly under the character of a sacrifice. And the moral uses of it are so plain, and withal so various, and exceeding great, that it may be question'd, whether any thing of a positive nature can possibly be appointed, that has a stronger tendency to promote the practice of virtue; nay, as will sufficiently appear by just enumerating them, of the most amiable, generous, and heroic virtue.

In general, as we perform this fervice in bonour of Christ, we thereby, as well as by baptism, solemnly profess our belief of his religion, and consequently engage to make it the rule of our behaviour. - But to mention fome of its peculiar advantages. Frequently commemorating the death of Christ as a facrifice for fin, must maintain in us a constant sirm belief of that first principle even of natural religion, that God is ready to forgive all fincere penitents, and a rewarder of them that diligently feek him; and at the same time, as it sets before us our own great demerit, must impress a strong and lively sense of the goodness of God, in freely pardoning our offences, and rewarding fo abundantly our fincere tho imperfect virtue; the natural consequence of which will be, shame for having done amiss, and affronted the government of so gracious, and compashonate

fionate a being, and the highest abborrence of fuch an ungenerous conduct for the future. If we reflect with becoming gratitude on God's wonderful benevolence, and mercy to mankind, 'tis impossible but this must produce a chearful obedience to all his commands; and especially, a delight in doing good after his most excellent and perfect example. ----Again, when we remember, that the very design of the death of Christ was to redeem us from all iniquity, and make us zealous of good works *, and that, upon these terms only, we are to expect any advantage from it; nothing can have a more powerful tendency to excite to firiet, and universal purity.

FARTHER, if we consider our partaking of this ordinance as a communion (the cup of blessing, which we bless, as the communion of the blood of Christ, and the bread, which we break, as the communion of the body of Christ, †) by which we acknowledge ALL sincere Christians, however denominated, and distinguished, as our brethren, members, together with ourselves, of the same spiritual body, or society, intitled to the same privileges, and having the same hope of their calling; that we, being many, are one bread, and one body, because we are all partakers of that one bread ‡; this must be of excellent use to promote

* Tit. 2. 14. † 1 Cor. 10. 16. ‡ Ver. 17.

mutual esteem, concord, and barmony; and if the true intention of it was follow'd, would make Christians regard one another according to their real merit, and not for the trifling peculiarities of any particular sect; and effectually reconcile all party differences: by which means, impositions upon conscience, violent controverses, unscriptural terms of communion, schisms, persecutions, &c. which have been of fatal confequence both to religion, and civil fociety, would be entirely prevented. --- But left we should stop here, and confine our benevolence to the houshould of faith; considering the death of Christ as a propitiation for the fins of the whole world *, will naturally inspire an universal love of mankind. For there is an irrefistible force in the apostle's argument, If God so loved us, we, who are dependent upon, and oblig'd to each other, and can't subfist without a mutual intercourse of good offices, ought much more to love one another +.

INDEED, commemorating the death of Christ, in a devout and solemn manner, in its entire design, and with ALL its circumstances, will suggest the greatest, and most generous sentiments, and afford motives to the most extensive and heroic benevolence, that mankind can possibly practise. For be-

* 1 Fo, 2. 2.

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fides what has been already hinted, if we confider that God gave his Son to die for us while we were enemies *, this must kill all the feeds of malice and revenge in us; and raise such a noble spirit of humanity and compassion, as the greatest injuries shall not bear down and extinguish; which will be farther strengthen'd by reflecting on the behaviour of Christ, who, under the greatest abuses and indignities, pitied, and pray'd for his persecutors. — His example likewise, in chusing to die rather than forfeit his integrity, and to promote the happiness of mankind, will teach us, (and accordingly 'tis thus inculcated by St. John +) to facrifice all private confiderations, nay, life itself for the public good; and besides, has a tendency to beget in us an entire submission to providence under the worst circumstances that may befal us, and an undaunted fortitude, resolution, and constancy of mind, when we are call'd to fuffer in a good cause, and for the advancement of truth and virtue.-And all these arguments will receive an additional force, when we reflect, that the example we commemorate is that of a friend and generous benefactor, an example that is in itself amiable, and which we should consequently be ambitious to imitate; and from the innocence and dignity of the sufferer.

^{*} Rom. 5. 10. † 1 Jo. 3. 16:

As therefore it appears, that we can't commemorate the death of Christ in the manner, in which christianity has commanded it, without having our resolutions to practise universal virtue strengthen'd, and improving in the greatest, most amiable, useful, and godlike dispositions, which this institution has a peculiar, and most admirable aptitude to excite, and confirm; need I add any thing more to prove that 'tis worthy of God, a being of absolute purity, a being of most perfect and universal goodness? Or that 'tis becoming the wisdom of his providence, and suitable to the great end he has in view, the rectitude, and bappiness of the moral creation, to oblige us by a law made on purpose, and the practice of a plain, significant rite, to enter frequently upon such reflections as are of the utmost moral use, and yet, without some institution of this kind (confidering how little inclin'd the bulk of mankind are to think, unless they are put upon it) are likely to be omitted, or very much neglected; and besides, can't reasonably be expected to have that weight and influence in a slight, curfory, occasional meditation, as they will very probably, when they are confider'd as a folemn act of devotion, which we perform in obedience to an express divine command?

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A THIRD thing of a positive nature in the Christian revelation is, worshipping God thro' a mediator. Now'tis most evident, that the general notion of a mediator between God and man (the term being indefinite) can't in itself be absurd; but will be irrational, or otherwise, just as 'tis explain'd, and the nature, design, and uses of the mediation stated. And when Christ is styled a mediator, we can only learn from the New Testament what the word implies; and in that sense alone, in which he is there represented under that character, are christians oblig'd to worship God thro' a mediator. So that we ought not to fancy difficulties arbitrarily, and frighten ourselves with mere founds; but if we would proceed fairly, must consider whether there are really any objections against the account which the gospel gives of this matter.

AND the sum of the Christian doctrine is this, and this only. (1.) That we worship God in the name of Christ, i. e. according to his directions; encouraged by the express affurances, which God afforded the world by him, that he is a propitious being; and that our worship, formed upon the principles, and conducted by the rules, which Christianity prescribes, will be accepted. (2.) That we worship him as that most gracious Being, the father of ALL mankind, who, by Christ, has given the Gentile world, as well as the

Yews, a revelation of his will, and express promises of pardon, and eternal life; so that thro' bim, we both have an access, by one spirit, unto the father *. (3.) As a Being who has declar'd, that we are reconciled to him by the death of his Son +, who, for reasons above explain'd, is represented as putting away fin by the sacrifice of bimself; the wisdom, and goodness of which constitution, we are thankfully to acknowledge. St. Paul indeed speaks of Christ as interceding for us, in consequence of the facrifice which he had offer'd; but, I apprehend, we are under no necessity to understand these passages strictly: for as the epiftles, in which fuch language is used, were written to converted Jews wholly, or to churches where there was a mixture of Yews with Gentiles; he might only defign by it (which appears plainly to have been his view in the greatest part of the epistle to the Hebrews) that there was something analogous, in the Christian religion, to what they fo highly valued in the Mojaic institution; but of a much more excellent kind, and attended with more extensive and lasting advantages. (4.) Another thing implied in the Christian doctrine of worshipping God thro' a mediator is, that we confider him as one who governs us, and bestows blessings upon us, not immediately *+, but by Christ **, whom, as a reward of his perfect innocence, and voluntary

Christian revelation defended. 349 sufferings for the good of mankind, he has constituted, under himself, Lord of all *; giving him all power, in heaven, and in earth +: by whom he has reveal'd his will to us, and given us laws; affords us needful assistance in the discharge of our duty, and support under our various trials; and will, at last, judge the world in righteousness, and render to every man according to bis deeds ‡. And finally, that we worship Christ, as having the mediatorial kingdom conferr'd on him by the Father, and in obedience to his command ||; ascribing particularly glory, and dominion to him **, who, by the wife constitution of God, is our faviour, and king; but always in subordination to the glory of the one God and father of all, who alone has a right to our supreme worship, and obedience ++.

Now what is there in all this that is in the least dishonourable to God, or inconsistent with any principle of natural religion? Reason indeed could never have discover'd it, but, when it is reveal'd, can object nothing against it; and what, in the judgment of the most strict and impartial reason, may be true, and belongs to a scheme of religion, which in all the parts of it, has a visible tendency to promote the highest perfection, and happiness of human nature, miracles un-

^{*} Acts 10.36. Phil. 2. 9, 10, 11. † Matt. 28. 18. † Acts 17.31. Rom. 2.6, & 16 comp. | Jo. 5. 23. ** Heb. 13. 21. 2 Pet. 2. 18. Rev. 5. 13. †† Phil. 2. 11. deniably

deniably prove to be actually true. The appointing the death of Christ to be consider'd as a sacrifice has already been sufficiently vindicated; and this unavoidably infers the reasonableness of worshipping God under the character of that all-wife, and most merciful Being, who has fix'd upon this method of pardoning finners, and receiving them into favour. — His appointing Christ to manage, under himself, the government of the world, is repugnant to no one principle of reafon; but on the contrary, there is a beautiful congruity between his being constituted our Saviour, and the immediate bestower of the divine bleffings and favours upon mankind; and we can't but approve of God's rewarding, in so extraordinary a manner, a person of his unspotted innocence, and one who generously condescended to take upon him the human nature, and both did, and suffer'd fo much to maintain the cause of virtue, and promote our happiness. Then as for the worship which the New Testament directs us to pay to Christ, fince 'tis no more than the respect which is properly due to one, whom God has invested with the characters of our faviour, and ruler, and made head over all things to the church *; it must be as necessarily fit, while those relations subsist, as the duties even of natural morality. And it can be no derogation from the absolute, and supreme per-

^{*} Eph. 1. 22.

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fection of the first, and greatest of beings, that an inferior is respected in proportion to his merit, and dignity, and honour'd with subordinate worship, in obedience to his express command; because this is, really, an act of homage to himfelf, and an acknowledgment of his unrival'd and matchless excellence: and fo far from giving his glory to another, that 'tis only offering that other what he could not receive; fince it would be an affront and disparagement to him to be serv'd with any worship of an inferior kind, with any worship of which he is not the supreme, and ultimate object, and all the reasons for which do not center absolutely and entirely in himself.

I shall only add, that the doctrine of Christ's mediation serves, in general, the same purposes with that of his sacrifice. For at the same time that it necessarily supposes God to be propitious, it impresses a constant sense of the evil of sin, and the sinner's unworthiness of the divine savour upon the account of it; and consequently is a standing lecture of humility. So that 'tis calculated, in all ages, to inspire moral sentiments of universal advantage (especially considering, how apt mankind are to be blind to their own saults, and presume upon the mercy of God) and must, if rightly consider'd, be always a strong motive to purity, and virtue.

FROM what has been faid it appears, that the scripture doctrine of a mediator is entirely rational, and subservient to moral purposes; and that there is not the least foundation in it for those low and unworthy conceptions of the Deity, to which (as the author of Christianity &c. imagines) " the " mediatory Gods among the Heathen owe " their rise *." Nay, the Christian revelation has, in its general doctrine, guarded so fully against all fuch mistakes, that 'tis impossible even for the weakest to fall into them, if they take their religion only from thence (which is a very reasonable expectation, at least among Protestants, whose fundamental principle 'tis, that the scriptures are their only rule) and not from partyschemes, or the wild suggestions of fancy and enthusiasm. No Christian, who reads his Bible but with the fame care with which he reads any the most common writings, can ever suppose (and that the adversaries of Christianity must know) that a mediator was appointed " either to fuggest to the supreme "God some reasons he before was ignorant " of; or that by his importunities he might " prevail on his weakness, to do what other-" wise he was not willing to do +." And lest the people should be so absurd as to think, that the mediator had " a greater

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 86.

" kindness for, and readiness to do good to " mankind than the supreme God himself; and that the sollicitations of the former, " made the latter better-natur'd than other-" wife he would be; which of course would " take off their love from the supreme God, " and place it on the mediator, upon whose " powerful intercession they so much de-" pended *;" particular care is taken, throughout the whole New Testament, to ascribe this constitution intirely to the love of God, to his most free, unconstrain'd, nay unsollicited goodness. He is describ'd as the original contriver and author of it, prompted by nothing but his effential, and innate benevolence; and Christ to have acted only by his direction, and according to the plan his infinite wisdom had form'd. So that 'tis not more plainly, nor so frequently inculcated, that we are bound thankfully to acknowledge the condescension of Christ in the part he sustain'd, as that our ultimate obligations of love and gratitude are to the supreme God, and Father of all; even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and God of all comfort +, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings, in beavenly places, thro' him; -- Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ, to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the g'ory

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^{*} Christianity &c. p. 86. + 2 Cor. 1. 3.

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^{*} Christianity &c. p. 86.

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^{*} Christianity &c. p. 86. + 2 Cor. 1. 3.

of his grace, wherein he has made us accepted in the beloved; and wherein he hath abounded towards us in all wisdom, and prudence *.

THERE is one remark more which our author hath made, that I think worth reciting: " However (fays he) the heathens " allowing one, and but one most high God, " did not so far derogate from the ho-" nour of the one true God, as to pre-" tend that the most distinguish'd among " their feveral mediators was equal to " him; Equality and Mediation being as " inconfistent as Equality and Supremacy. " And they would have made their reli-" gion an errant jumble, if they had wor-" shipped these Gods sometimes as mediators " only; fometimes as fovereign disposers of " things; and fometimes as both toge-" ther +." I think it, I fay, worth while to recite this passage, not that 'tis any difficulty against the Christian religion itself, which teaches nothing at all of this mysterious, incomprehensible divinity; but that christians may fee how much it fuffers by the darkness, and confusion of human schemes, which are not only father'd upon it, but rank'd among its fundamental, and most important doctrines. And, I hope, fince this is a common cause (the honour of Christianity being evidently concern'd in it) they

^{*} Eph. 1. 3, 5, 6, 8. † Christianity &cc. p. 87.

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will all agree to lay aside unscriptural subtilties, and distinctive party phrases, and be content to represent the Christian doctrine just as they find it in the writings of the New Testament; and then they will have but little to sear from the skill or malice of its adversaries. For tho some modern scholastic explications of it may be attended with insuperable difficulties, and always distress those who undertake the defence of them; the original revelation itself will, I am persuaded, stand the test of reason, and bear even a severe, and critical, provided it be likewise an bonest, and impartial, examination.

AND it will confirm us in this belief, that we find the most able of its opposers (not excepting the author of Christianity &c. himself) generally bend all their aim this way, and level their objections not against the New Testament directly, but against those gross misrepresentations, and corruptions of its genuine and real fense, which the weakness and superstition of men, or perhaps worse causes, have introduc'd; or if they sometimes attack the original records of our religion, 'tis by interpreting passages so strictly, and rigorously, as could never be their most obvious, and natural meaning; or else, by picking little scraps A a 2

out of a connected discourse, that, by themselves, may well seem odd and unaccountble, and yet have a great propriety, and beauty, when confider'd in their connection: which, it must be allow'd, is a more cunning, if it be not altogether so fair a way of proceeding. For 'tis much safer to fall upon the confusions, and inconsistencies of party writers, than upon original Christianity itself; or if it be a man's defign to run down any book whatever, the more loofely he reads, and the oftner he quotes passages merely for their found, the better; the less he understands it, the more fault he is likely to find; and fo the number of his objections, at least, which perhaps may influence some weak people, or others who are already disaffected; the number, I say, of his objections, if not the weight, will swell considerably. But that any persons who act thus should assume the character of free thinkers, and treat all the rest of the world as bigots, and enthuhafts, is most amazing; fince such a conduct is, in truth, the farthest distant that can be from a generous temper; and argues, on the contrary, besides intolerable vanity, and insolence, great narrowness of mind, and the most abject, and slavish prejudice. A service has the King of regular

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THUS have I finish'd all that I proposed in this argument, and consider'd, so far as they affect either the usefulness, or the truth and excellency of the christian revelation, all the main reasonings of the author of Christianity &c. in the first part of his defign. And indeed, from what appears, he is determin'd to do no farther execution; fo that there was no need of staying for the fecond part, which, if there be nothing in it but what the author hath promis'd, will be perfectly barmless. Nay, the most valuable part of it, (for I think we have but little concern with the fentiments of Jews, Gentiles, and Mahometans, or even of the fathers of the church, which are testimonies intirely foreign in a matter of rational inquiry, but are intended however for the amplification, and ornament of the work;) the most valuable part of it, I fay, is nothing new, and nothing but what has been perform'd most excellently, and with the greatest strength of reason, by several christian writers *. It may therefore be justly prefum'd, that whatever other works of this kind the ingenious author may be engag'd in, they will not divert him from the more necessary business of reviewing, upon all proper occa-

^{*} Vide Christianity &c. p. 427, 429.

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sions, what he has already written; and that having appeal'd in it to the judgment of the public, he will not expect to be believ'd implicitly; but think himself oblig'd either to defend it, or else, in a frank, open manner acknowledge his mistakes, like an bonest man, and a sincere lover of truth.

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HAT I have said concerning the Sacrifice of Christ, being thought not to be the true scripture doctrine, by some CHRISTIANS, whom I should be very sorry to

offend, while I am maintaining the common cause of Christianity against UNBELIEV-ERS; I think it proper to review it a little, and offer a few things for the farther explaining and illustrating this important subject.

I AM persuaded, that those who have excepted against what I have offer'd have, generally, misunderstood me. But as my meaning has been mistaken, not only by common superficial readers, but likewise by persons, whose good sense and judgment can't be disputed; I must, in modesty, suppose, that there is some obscurity in the account which

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I have given, owing to this at least, viz. to its being too short, and general.

To remove objections therefore, and fet the matter in a clear light, I defire it may be consider'd, that the New-Testament only lays down the doctrine relating to Christ's Sacrifice, but does not enter directly, and particularly, into the reasons of it; whereas my only defign was to shew, against the opposers of revelation, that this part of the Christian doctrine is wife, and rational. In order to which, I indeed took notice of some absurd notions that are father'd upon Christianity, tho there is not the least hint about them in the whole New Testament; but allow'd every thing that the Scripture has plainly and distinctly afferted upon this head, without the least thought of evading the grammatical and obvious sense of any of the texts, by strain'd and unnatural criticisms. I have expresly affirm'd that " the death of Christ is very " fitly represented as a facrifice, nay, de-" scribed in the strongest facrifical phrases ";" and gone all along upon the supposition, that the first and most obvious sense of those texts, viz. that he appear'd to put away fin by the facrifice of himfelf +, gave his life a ranfom for many t, that we are redeem'd with the precious blood of Christ ||, and that God fent his son to be the propitiation for our fins, **

^{*} Page 334. † Heb. 9. 26. ‡ Mat. 20. 28.

and the like; I have gone all along, I fay, upon the supposition, that the first and most obvious sense of those texts is, that by the wise appointment of God, we are to consider the death of Christ as the thing, upon the account of which he pardons our fins, and confers life and immortality upon us; I fay, by the appointment of God, because the whole efficacy of it (the death of Christ not being necessarily, and in its own nature, an expiatory facrifice) must arise from his ordaining, and accepting it as such. And if this be allow'd, let it be call'd the term or condition of our forgiveness, I shall not think it needful to dispute about mere words, when the utmost such expressions amount to, can be no more than this, which I never denied, and now freely grant, that the all-wife Governour of the world thought fit to fix upon this method of pardoning fin, and, in this way only, to declare his accepting his guilty creatures upon their repentance, and reward their fincere, tho imperfect virtue.

FROM this short account, it will, I conceive, clearly appear, that I have not misre-presented the Christian doctrine relating to Christ's sacrifice, and that the objections against what I have written upon this head have been owing, in a great measure, to a misapprehension of my true design. Several of my readers seem to have imagin'd, that what I have offer'd was design'd as an account of the scrip-

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ture doctrine, or as an explication of texts, nay, that I thought the word facrifice to fignify, strictly, a memorial. Whereas my only intention was to shew (allowing the doctrine itself to be just as it is represented in the writings of the New Testament, and taking the expresfions there us'd in their most obvious, and natural sense) the wise ends that might be serv'd by it; or, in other words, without questioning in the least that the death of Christ is, by God's appointment, a propitiation, a sacrifice, an atonement, &c. to give some account of the reasons, which may be suppos'd to have determin'd his infinite wisdom to choose this way of shewing mercy to sinners, and receiving them into favour. And my affigning as a wife reason for the institution of sacrifices, that they were proper and useful memorials, was a very clear intimation to the reader, that I had different ideas to the two words: For if the ideas were exactly the same, I must not only have thought that sacrifices were useful memorials, but that every useful memorial is a sacrifice; of which, I believe, I need not clear myself.

AND fince it appears, that those texts, which represent the death of Christ as a sa-crifice for sin, a sin-offering, and the like, and speak of it in the strongest sacrifical phrases, contain nothing inconsistent with what I have advanc'd, because I have no dispute, upon this head, with either friends, or enemies

enemies of Christianity (the not mentioning which particularly, in the foregoing difcourse, I acknowledge to have been a great defect, as it would probably have prevented the objections of many honest, and judicious readers) I can think but of one passage, relating to the doctrine itself, that needs to be atlittle explain'd, and vindicated, viz. " that " the death of Christ would have happen'd " [i.e. fo far as appears to us, or as we can " judge from what is reveal'd in the holy " scripture] if it had never been design'd as " a facrifice; and confequently was not ap-" pointed arbitrarily, and folely with a view " to that "." Now this, which I apprehend to be of great importance in the present argument, I can, as yet, see no reason to recede from. I chose to express myself in this manner, because the Gospel-history most evidently represents the matter thus, viz. " that the Son of God, for publishing the " will of his heavenly Father in a corrupt " and degenerate age, was abused, and per-" fecuted, and by wicked hands crucified, " and flain." This is the plain fact as it is there related; a fact, which it would be mere trifling to attempt to prove: and, in my opinion, it can't be denied, that the death of Christ was " the natural conse-" quence of his attempting to reform a " corrupt and vitious people, and opposing

" their superstition, and darling prejudices," without destroying the truth of that history, and consequently of Christianity itself. Since therefore his death was " the natural con-" sequence of his integrity in his prophetic " character," and could not have been avoided but by infincere compliances on his part, or by a miraculous interpolition; we must suppose " that it would have actually " happen'd if it had never been appointed as " a factifice," or be forc'd to make precarions suppositions about which the New Testament is wholly filent. And if, as far as appears to us (the Christian revelation giving us no ground to carry our conjectures farther, and there being not the least foundation in reason to suppose, that God would not have fent his Son into the world with this view only, that he might make a revelation of his mind and will, fuited to the corrupt and degenerate state of the world, tho he foresaw it would end in his death) if I fay, as far as appears to us, " the death of Christ would have hap-" pen'd, tho it had never been appointed as " a facrifice," it necessarily follows, that, as far as we can judge, " it was not ordain'd ar-" bitrarily, and folely with a view to that." Nay farther, we may fairly conclude, (at least this is the utmost we can conclude, if we go no farther than we have fure principles to reason from) that the necessity of this method of pardoning fin was not an absolute necessity, but a necessity arising from circumstances,

cumstances, or more properly, a sitness which the circumstances of things suggested; i. e. in other words, it was fixed upon by the infinite wisdom of God, which always does what is best, because it was an over-ruling and directing a natural event to serve the wifest. and most useful purpose, for the honour of his government, and the good of his creatures. But on the other hand, whereas I have faid, that " the first view of God, in " fending Christ into the world, was, that as " prophet, he might restore the true religi-" on, &c. *" I should now rather choose to express myself thus, that he pitch'd upon so great and excellent a person, both that, by the dignity of his character, he might conciliate a greater attention, and regard to his doctrine, and that the death of this divine messenger, which he forefaw would happen, if not miraculously prevented, might answer the wife and valuable ends of a Jacrifice for fin; without determining which of these was the first, or principal reason. For it's probable that both of them together (fince it appears they concur) and neither fingly, influenc'd the all-wife governour of the world to employ his only begotten Son upon this occasion; by whose mediation those ends are more effectually promoted, than they could be by that of a nyother being whatfoever.

THE death of Christ was undoubtedly predetermin'd, but that does not prove that it did not happen in the natural course of things, i. e. in the same manner, and by the same kind of instruments, as the death of other prophets, and righteous men, who have preach'd repentance and reformation to an ignorant and degenerate age. So far indeed it may be ascrib'd to God, that it could not have happen'd if he had not fent him into the world; nay farther, that he fent him when he foresaw this consequence of it, and upon that fore-knowledge how the event would be, if the malice of his enemies was suffer'd to take its course, determin'd not to interpose, but to permit it; or in other words, determin'd that it should be. But to proceed farther than this, we have, I think, no ground in reason, or warrant from Holy Scripture. On the contrary, St. Peter expresly fays, that our Saviour was deliver'd by the determinate counsel, and fore-knowledge of God *; the most obvious and natural sense of which is, by the purpoje of God to leave the Jews to themselves, upon the fore-knowledge that they would then put him to death. And to argue from the nature of the thing itself; as the destroying such an innocent and useful person, a divine messenger, and the Son of God, was unquestionably a very wicked ac-

^{*} Acts ii. 23.

tion, it will not, I presume, be thought, that the most wise, and boly governour and judge of the world could have determin'd any thing about it further, than to suffer natural causes to operate, and the event (which he foresaw would happen without a miraculous interposition) to take place.

HOWEVER, tho the death of Christ fell out in the natural course of things, it was not thus a facrifice. That was owing entirely to the purpose and decree of God, and confequently, upon the fore-knowledge that his death would otherwise happen, was abfolutely predetermin'd, and in the strongest and fullest sense, that any texts, either in the Old or New Testament, speak of it. I shall only add, that those who believe that the death of Christ was absolutely determin'd as a sacrifice, otherwise than upon the fore-knowledge that it would happen in the manner it did, must be oblig'd to prove, that if there had been no need of his coming into the world as a prophet, he would have been fent with no other view, than to die; nay farther, that if the Jews, who were free agents, and not under a necessity of puting him to death, instead of rejecting and persecuting, had receiv'd and honour'd him as a prophet, God would immediately have interpos'd, and have appointed the manner in which, and the instrument by whom, he should have been directly offered as a Sacrifice; which appear to me to be

mere imaginary schemes, that have no foundation either in reason, or revelation.

NOTHING now remains, but briefly to review what I have offer'd concerning the uses of expiatory facrifices, and particularly the wife ends that might be answer'd by God's appointing the death of Christ to be consider'd under that character. And that no sacrifices of this kind (nay not that of Christ himself) were design'd to propitiate the Deity, that they could not be necessary with respect to him, to incline him to be favourable and gracious to mankind, follows necessarily from hence, that they derive their whole efficacy and value from bis appointment; and " the " very institution of them", must, in the nature of the thing, suppose " that he was " already propitious +," already dispos'd to be merciful and forgive the offences of his creatures, and only fix'd upon this as the most rational and proper way of dispensing his mercy. This I take to be demonstration, to which nothing needs be added. However, we may observe, to strengthen and confirm it farther, that the sacrifice of Christ is reprefented, throughout the whole New Testament, as proceeding from the love and compassion of God towards mankind, but never as the cause of it; as the effect of his mercy, not the argument or motive inducing him to by whom, he thould have been wh

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be merciful: this is the constant strain of the Gospel, and there is not so much as a single passage which intimates the contrary.

In like manner, as facrifices derive all their wirtue from God's ordaining and accepting them, and forgiveness of sin is always describ'd as an act of free and voluntary favour in the Deity; it plainly appears, that they neither were, nor could be, in the sense in which I have us'd the expression, proper expiations; i. e. that there was nothing, in their abstract nature, that could atone for moral guilt, or merit pardon, or, in other words, that there was no necessary connection in reason, independent on the will and pleasure of God, between offering the sacrifice, and the forgiveness of the offender.

What other use then could they be defign'd to serve, since they could neither be intended to propitiate our most merciful God, nor, in a strict sense, to expiate the guilt of sin *) besides that of being "standing me-Bb" morials

* When the words, propiliation and expiation, are used in scripture, they have, I apprehend, a very different meaning: and the truth of the case I take to be this. God was inclin'd, by his innate goodness and mercy, to pardon the sins of mankind upon their repentance, and receive them into favour; but at the same time was resolv'd to do it in such a way as would be most honourable to his persections and government; and consequently was most becoming a wise and holy governour. As the sacrifice of Christ therefore, which he appointed, tho it did not incline him to be merciful, is the

" morials of God's reconcileableness, for in-" stance, and readiness to forgive his guilty " creatures upon their repentance, of his " strict and absolute purity, and of the great " evil and demerit of fin?" And what other reason, can we suppose, determin'd his infinite wisdom to appoint them, but their moral influence, and particularly, that he might exercise his mercy towards mankind in such a manner, as would most effectually support the practice of virtue, and discourage vice and wickedness? By this method of grace and pardon, he has most awfully demonstrated his spotles s purity, and irreconcileable aversion to sin, and wisely maintain'd the bonour of his moral government, by doing what is best calculated to promote the great end of it, the perfection and happiness of his subjets.

I HOPE what I have now added will satisfy the friends of Christianity, as well as silence the cavils of its adversaries. And I can assure the reader, that as I would not pay

way in which he chose actually to dispense his mercy, he is the propitiation: and because it is the method in which he actually forgives our offences, and discharges us upon our sincere repentance, from guilt; in this sense it is an expiation likewise. And 'tis upon the same account that we are said to be reconciled to God by the death of his son, Rom. 5. 10. tho we never meet in the New Testament with such an expression as this, that God was thereby reconciled to us; because, perhaps, it would convey to the bulk of mankind a very different idea, contrary to what has been shewn to be the reason of the thing, and the general tenour of the Christian revelation.

pay so much deference to human explications of scripture, how popular soever, as to betray any important and useful truth; so neither would I deviate, in the least, from commonly received principles, for the sake of being singular.

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